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Schoolin' women: hip hop pedagogies of black women rappers

Nichole Ann Guillory
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

SCHOOLIN' WOMEN:
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Nichole Ann Guillory
B.S., Louisiana State University, 1993
M.Ed., University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 1998
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For my mother Linda Espree and my grandmother Lovenia Espree

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ABSTRACT

The curriculum studies field has much to gain from an analysis of black women rappers' texts. The knowledge black women rappers offer through their songs is worthy of study in schooling spaces and is too valuable for educators to continue to ignore if they want to become better teachers. Through their lyrics, black women rappers situate themselves in a public context and construct texts that represent young black women's complex identities. Black women rappers create a space in hip hop discourse from which their stories enrich and complicate the public conversation about the representation of black women's identities. This study of black women rappers' representations, which builds on and extends the scholarship of curriculum theorists who write about popular culture and pedagogy, is an examination of the song lyrics of eight mainstream contemporary black women rappers: Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, Eve, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, Mia X, Da Brat, and Queen Pen. This study is an effort to enable teachers to understand the critiques black women rappers make about young black women's experiences, deconstruct black women rappers' representations of black women's identities, expose the contradictions in black women rappers' texts, and value black women rappers' texts as pedagogical.

A textual analysis centered in a black feminist theoretical framework was used to examine the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in black women rappers' representations of black women's identities. The analysis reveals that black women rappers teach important lessons about the representation of black women around questions of black women's sexuality usually defined in terms of male desire, mainstream beauty standards, the roles of black women in heterosexual relationships,

control over black women's bodies, the privileging of heterosexuality, the connection between sexual freedom and black women's ownership of capital, and the necessity of black women writing their own representations rather than being defined by others.

CHAPTER ONE
AN INTRODUCTION

Chuck D, William Wordsworth, and Arbor Heights High[1]: The Day (in English class) I Fell In Love With Hip Hop…

I have not been a hip hop head for life.[2] I am relatively new to the game. I am not one of those cultural critics who can legitimately call herself a hip hop junkie. I cannot truthfully recall the good old days when I lived and breathed hip hop; in other words, I am not one of those cultural critics who is able to tell you where she was when she first heard "Rapper's Delight," who once break-danced on cardboard and rocked b-girl gold nameplates on oversized rope chains, or who used to listen to bass booming on giant speakers at block parties and clubs around the way. Hip hop and I did not grow up together. I grew up in the 1980s listening to pop, the music that true hip hop heads hate. Publicly I worshiped Michael Jackson—the one with brown skin and a black nose back in the day—for Thriller and his moon walking across the stage during the Motown 25th Anniversary Special. Privately I loved Prince—the one before the name change and break with Warner Brothers—for his sexually bold, adventurous lyrics, forbidden fruit that was supposed to be off limits and too explicit for my unsoiled Catholic schoolgirl ears.

To true hip hop heads, I am a fraud, a fake, an outsider who is not keeping it real. To true hip hop heads, I am not an expert in hip hop culture because much of my knowledge comes from what I have read, not lived. To true hip hop heads, I am just

[1] Arbor Heights is not the actual name of the school.

[2] Examples of cultural critics who label themselves lifelong fans of hip hop include Boyd (2003), Davis (1995), Morgan (1999), Powell (2003), and Roberts & Ulen (2000). They call themselves "hip hop heads for life" and "hip hop junkies," and they remember "growing up with hip hop," "breakdancing on cardboard" and the first time they heard "Rapper's Delight."

another privileged somebody trying to make paper—in my case, a dissertation—off black women's bodies (of songs), another voyeuristic amateur academic/wanna be cultural critic commodifying black women's culture for consumption by an educated, mostly white (curriculum theory) elite. I have tried to talk myself into believing that I was born to write alongside women rappers, that their womanist spirit called to me through the text that is hip hop, that I have always felt a connection with the stories about black women they create in their songs, that I feel their angst, understand their language, and share their experiences. But all of these are lies. The truth is that sometimes during the process of making meaning(s) of black women rappers' lyrics, I experience black women rappers' texts as if I were a foreigner in strange lands struggling to make sense of the unfamiliar.

How did I arrive in these strange lands? My trip began eleven years ago in the spring of 1993. I was a very young and very scared student teacher searching for success in a public high school that the district labeled "urban/at-risk/inner city"—the politically acceptable code language for an all-black school. An institution different from the mostly white, privileged Catholic schooling with which I was familiar, Arbor Heights High School was a training ground every student teacher in my cohort avoided. A well-publicized murder of a high school student there the previous year and a well-known, mostly media-generated, reputation in the community as a low-achieving educational institution frightened most away. I named Arbor Heights as my first choice for student teaching placements rationalizing that if I could be a successful teacher there, I could go on to make it as a teacher anywhere. My rationale sounds hokey and overly enthusiastic today, but back then it felt true.

After just a few weeks of getting to know my students at Arbor Heights, my first assignment was to teach two sonnets written by the Romantic poet William Wordsworth to six classes of seniors with graduation on their minds. It was mid-spring and senior-apathy was intense. I was desperate for a method. I did not know much about teaching, but I did realize that the only chance I had at a meaningful lesson was to use my students' interests to bridge the gap between their worlds and the content I was required to teach. I suspected that a possible reason for their difficulty with previous texts was that teachers had not created an opportunity for students to connect their lives with the literature they had been reading. I cared about my students enough to learn that they loved rap and were confident in their knowledge of it. Determined to meet students where they were, I used raps by Public Enemy and Arrested Development as an entryway into the study of Wordsworth. As preparation for the study of "London, 1802" and "The World Is Too Much With Us," two sonnets by Wordsworth about social problems of his day, I asked students to examine "911 Is a Joke" and "Shut Em Down" by Public Enemy and "Mr. Wendal" and "Give a Man a Fish" by Arrested Development for discussions of contemporary social problems like police brutality, poverty, HIV/AIDS, drug addiction, suicide, gang violence, and materialism. Students worked in groups to write an explanation of their songs' form, content, and figurative language.

Born out of necessity, my method—to use raps as resources to scaffold traditional "canonic" literature—seemed radical to everyone except me. Then rap did not rule mainstream popular culture as it does today, and it certainly was not considered worthy of study as poetry in the high school English classroom. My university supervisor, mentor teacher, and even my students were shocked when I introduced rap alongside

Romantic poetry without contrived comparisons. To plan a substantive lesson, I immersed myself in rap culture. Initially, I thought listening to rap records my students liked would help me to gain credibility as an expert in the culture, but I soon had to accept that my students were the real authorities. I knew a little about Wordsworth, they knew a lot about the raps I had chosen for comparison, and all of us learned something new together. That lesson was the beginning of my commitment to and respect for the realm of the popular in enacting pedagogy, and though I am not able to recall when and where I first heard "Rapper's Delight," I do remember the day of that lesson, the day rap became so necessary in my (teaching/learning) life.

Mother Audre, Auntie bell, and Cousin Tricia: En-gender-ing My-Selves

The writing of my understandings of black women rappers' texts into curriculum theory discourse began as an effort to fill a void, the empty space where black women have often been erased, skipped over, and disregarded. It has evolved into something that has enabled me to reach deeper self-awareness about the complexities of and tensions within my own life as a black woman. Black working-class woman. Black working-class heterosexual woman. Black working-class heterosexual hip hop generation woman. Black working-class heterosexual hip hop generation woman teacher/student. Black working-class heterosexual hip hop generation woman teacher/student from the South. Black-working class heterosexual hip hop generation woman teacher/student from the South studying in a predominantly white institution….

I do not claim feminist in the string of labels that I use to identify who I am. You'd think that I, a girl child taught how to grow up proud, determined, and self-reliant by women who were all of these things, would wear a feminist nametag proudly. But I

am reluctant. Most of what I have read about mainstream feminist movement does not speak to my blackness and working class-ness and location in the South, and most of the black feminist theory that I have read does not speak to the real contradictions of my life as a hip hop generation black woman. As much as I am willing to accept it, feminism is best represented in the complicated lives of the women in my family who survived sharecropping in the Jim Crow South, who braved single motherhood after the death of their husbands, who valued education enough to work as many jobs as was necessary to pay for their children's tuition, and who passed on their creative spirit-energy in every meal they prepared for others. And these were the same fiercely independent women who cautioned me against speaking too boldly at my mostly white schools and who insisted that good girls always kept their dresses down and legs closed. I cannot define a feminism any more real or meaningful than what their lives have shown me about the oppressive forces working against black women. Feminism breathes in my mother and grandmother who have had to work low-paying jobs, raise children by themselves, and stay strong no matter what.

Even though I grew up knowing through the examples of my mother and grandmother that to be black and woman often equaled struggling to survive life, I did not factor gender into my identity equation as much as I factored in race and class. I identified race and class easily enough because of the marked differences between my almost all-white, affluent Catholic schooling environment and my all-black, mostly poor and working-class home environment. Consequently, I often attributed struggles that I faced to my black-ness and working-class-ness. I used these two to define myself, and I did not recognize gender as equally important to the complicatedness of my identity.

Before beginning the writing of my understandings of black women rappers' lyrics, I could not connect with the stories they created about black women's lives because I only had a limited awareness of who I was. Unable to respond to the womanist call in many black women rappers' texts, I could not appreciate many of their songs. For a very long time, rap, for me, was coded male. All of my favorite rappers were black men: Rakim because his lyrical skills were simultaneously sexy and smart and Chuck D because he was everything a black man was supposed to be—strong, smart, and defiant. Identifying black men as the best rappers, I did not believe that black women were real rappers. They could not be because they were not men. Even in my teaching, the raps that I chose for my students to compare with canonical literature were almost always written and performed by black men. The only woman rapper I remember listening to was Queen Latifah, and I listened to her only as often as she was given airtime on the radio. My favorite song of hers was "U-N-I-T-Y," not for its obvious pro-black woman anthem about strength, independence, and community, but because of its catchy hook and danceable beats. I was not conscious back then of the resonances in Latifah's songs with my own life as a young black woman. I was not able to connect Latifah's womanist descriptions of strong, independent, and resilient black women with the women in my family or with myself.

Until I engaged in the process of uncovering the multiple, sometimes contradictory, layers of my own identity, I was unable to respond to and appreciate women rappers' cultural productions. The process of more complex self-understanding began as a result of some very loud silences about black women in curriculum theory. To make sense of required readings that seemed foreign to me, I turned to other sources for

my intellectual becoming. The texts which spoke loudest to me were those by black women theorists, particularly Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Tricia Rose, and Joan Morgan. Theorizing by these black women about our experiences made the most sense to me and called into question understandings of my world and myself: Audre Lorde (1984) for her insistence that black women break through the silence about our sexual selves, bell hooks (1989) for her framing of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy as dependent on interlocking systems of oppression, Angela Davis (1998) for her particular attention to class in relation to black women and for her black feminist analysis of blues women's songs, Tricia Rose (1994) for her cultural critique of texts by earlier generations of women rappers shaped as conversation with essentializing discourses on black womanhood, and Joan Morgan (1999) for her definition of a hip hop feminism that speaks to the contradictions of my life and my generation.

All of these women's texts have become more to me than just "theory" to fill a void in curriculum theory discourse. Alongside texts by some of the current generation of women rappers, writings by Lorde, hooks, Davis, Rose, and Morgan challenge my own and others' taken-for-granted assumptions about black women. They have also helped me to recognize myself as more than raced and classed. They have enabled me to name my other subjectivities and the tensions I experience when they collide: complicated blends of gender and race, working-class and middle-class, old school Civil Rights and new school hip hop generations, theory and practice, white feminism and black feminism, the academy and the streets, individualism and community. The women themselves have become more to me than writers of theory and performers of rap. They have become hoped-for women in my family—sisters, aunties, cousins, and friends who

carve out cultural spaces from which to construct their complex identities and offer their multiple perspectives as black women. I owe my intellectual becoming and my framework of understanding to them.

Bitches, Bling, and BabyMamas: A Contradictory (Hip Hop) Con(Text)

When I started this research, my focus was on the methodological, just as it had been during my experiences as a high school English teacher. My questions centered on practical concerns: how black women rappers' songs could be utilized as teaching tools in the English classroom. Due to this narrow focus, I identified songs as having teaching value only if they contained positive, uplifting messages and representations of black women. These were the messages and representations the teacher in me decided were best suited to be instructional resources in the classroom. I knew from my teaching history that I had to locate up-to-date rap texts if I wanted to develop curriculum that spoke to students' lives.

I turned to two groups of young people for a list of the most current and popular black women rappers: local area high school students taught by Holmes interns whom I supervised and college students enrolled with me in an undergraduate course entitled "History of African American Popular Culture." They informed me that their generation, comprised of mostly high school and college-age students, considered black women rappers of my generation out-dated or "Old School." Queen Latifah, Salt-n-Pepa, and MC Lyte were no longer cool, but Missy Elliott, Eve, Mia X, Da Brat, Lil Kim, and Foxy Brown were. I studied these women's texts hoping to find images that ran counter to the negative stereotypes of black women often presented by male rappers, but they were very different from the positive, strong black woman anthems with which I was familiar by

Queen Latifah, Salt-n-Pepa, and MC Lyte. Many songs written and performed by this current generation of black women rappers troubled me. More often than not, these women presented some of the most negative stereotypes of blackness in general and black women in particular. In many songs, they called themselves bitches, glorified marijuana smoking, expressed an insatiable desire for sexual intercourse with men, idolized material possessions, revealed a distrust of sisterhood among black women, celebrated black ghetto culture, and toted the ultimate phallic symbol, the gun. Their songs reminded me of men's raps I had listened to growing up, raps that mostly denigrated the image of black women. I concluded that all of these images did more harm than good and thus had no value to English teachers.

I dismissed these women and their raps, probably because I sensed a generational divide between us. I did not quite fit in with the hip hop generation to which these black women rappers belonged, a generation often accused of being grounded in materialism and individualism, even though I was close in age to some of them. And I was too young for inclusion in the older Civil Rights Movement generation even though I felt closer in spirit to it. I was someone who knew her history, who was familiar with the negative stereotypes of black women—mammy, jezebel, ho, welfare queen, baby mama, among others—and how people in power used these images against us as justification for our oppression. Black women rappers were members of a younger generation, a generation who did not know their history, for if they did, they would not represent black women in such demeaning ways. I felt that young black women rappers should know that the Civil Rights Movement ancestors had given their lives so that our generation could have access to an open microphone. They should know that a black woman was not supposed to call

herself, or any other black woman, a bitch, at least not in public. They should know to be discreet about sexual desire. They should know not to characterize another black woman as competition. They should know not to air any discord between black women and men. They should know to use their access and power to educate, not just entertain, audiences.

Many of the texts that I studied by the current generation of black women rappers were messy, that is, full of contradictions, and I was unable to connect with them because I was stuck in the past, trapped in a framework that required a monolithic black woman rapper, one like the politically conscious Latifah who proclaimed that all black women were queens who deserved respect. At first, I did not recognize the current generation of black women rappers as an integral part of a continuing history of black women involved in a larger struggle of resistance to defend our name in public discourses. I concluded, too hastily, that many current generation black women rappers denigrated our name more often than they defended or uplifted it. I guess I wanted these women always to offer their audiences honorable and idyllic representations of black women. I wanted them to use their access to large and varied audiences to represent black women in unproblematic, uncomplicated, unblemished—really unreal—ways. I wanted these women to pass on positive messages as their sister rappers had done before them.

During the question and answer period following my first presentation of a paper on black women rappers, a well-respected, widely published scholar who sat beside me as a fellow panelist told the audience that he had written about texts by earlier generations of rappers, but would no longer do so because the raps out now were not worth his attention. There just was not much there, I heard him say. In that moment, he erased women rappers and their texts, the writing of my understandings of them, and by

extension, me. I was angry that he could be so dismissive of work that had taken me such time, thought, and effort. Not yet firmly committed to an analysis of black women rappers' texts as my research focus, I wavered in my defense of the value and complexity of texts by the current generation of black women rappers. I became defensive because I could not yet articulate a strong argument for the inclusion of my analysis into the discourse of education in general and curriculum theory in particular. Since that conference, I have vacillated many times over my decision to study black women rappers' texts.

In my early readings of black women rappers' work, I passed judgment on their texts, engaged them only minimally, that is, at the level of interpretation based on the binary opposition of good versus bad. Concerned with how well black women rappers "uplifted the race" or "salvaged the denigrated image of black [women] in the white imagination" (Wallace, 1990, p. 1), my critiques of black women rappers' texts were similar to reading by early black cultural critics. According to hooks (1990), "the primary form that [early] black cultural criticism took was the question of good or bad images" (p. 4). My initial critiques of black women rappers' texts also took up the question of positive or negative representations in the cultural productions of black women rappers. My writing tended to focus on those women rappers who offered the most uplifting representations of black women. Aware of my positioning as a black woman researcher writing for a mostly white audience in curriculum theory, I selected for analysis only the most positive sets of lyrics I could locate. I did not want to damage black women any further in public discourses, especially an academic one. I saw my writing as an opportunity to help restore our good name in the white imagination. I was

guilty, however, of romanticizing black women rappers' contributions in the recovery of our image and guilty of making whiteness the center against which blackness is judged. I quickly ran out of writing ideas using a dualist model of good and bad to study black women rappers' work, for their lyrics were replete with contradictions—images of black women not good or bad, but images both good and bad at the same time. I realized the need for a more complicated approach that would not rely on dated notions of black-ness and blackwoman-ness and instead unlayer the complexity and expose the contradictions in black women rappers' representations while simultaneously examining the context in which (and sometimes against which) they are produced.

In my search to find rap texts that could be taught in the English classroom, I failed to accept the (hip hop) reality of the times: the social context in which (and sometimes against which) the current generation of women rappers writes and performs their songs is ripe with contradictions. To commit to an analysis of black women rappers' cultural productions as my research focus, I had to turn off the teacher I had been, a teacher whose intention was to use these women's texts only as instructional resources in a classroom. I had to become a student examining the complicated realities of hip hop generation black women. Viewing black women rappers' texts as scaffolding resources for traditional canonical literature was much too narrow an interest if I were to comprehend the complexity of this generation of women rappers' texts. When I moved away from my effort to highlight positive representations, I was able to recognize that black women rappers' stories are pedagogical in and of themselves. Their texts have much to teach us about how young black women performers choose to represent hip hop generation black women in their songs.

Overview of Study

Layered in meaning, black women rappers' texts warrant scholarly investigation. My study is an effort to understand, appreciate, and theorize the importance and complexity of representations by black women rappers while not (as much as is possible) celebrating them unconditionally, analyzing them uncritically, or magnifying their significance in the realm of popular culture. My study rests on one necessary premise: I understand black women rappers to be producers of knowledge—legitimate producers of knowledge on issues of black women's identity[3] and representation. In this study, I examine the knowledge that some black women rappers construct through the negotiation and representation of black women's identities. I do so by textual analysis of a few contemporary black women rappers' cultural productions. I complete a textual analysis of these women rappers' productions using an intersectional theoretical framework with a specific focus on raced, classed, and gendered representations from a black feminist curriculum studies perspective (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1993). I do not critique women rappers' texts with the intention of passing judgment on them by labeling them positive or negative. Rather, my perspective recognizes that popular culture texts have much to say about the ways people make meanings of their lives and the lives of others (Banks and Esposito, 2002).

Of particular interest to me is how the women rappers I have selected to include in this study negotiate and represent black women's identities in an environment that is highly commodified, mostly misogynous, and always changing. I recognize that because

[3]Castenell and Pinar's (1993) definition of identity is useful here: "Identity is not a static term either, reflective of a timeless, unchanging inner self. Rather, identity is a gendered, racialized, and historical construct" (p. 4).

black women rappers are "outsiders-within" (Collins, 2000, p. 11) the discourse of rap with a "unique angle of vision" (Collins, p. 184), they are uniquely situated to offer critiques about critical issues facing young black women now, "sistas of the post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul, hip hop generation" (Morgan, 1999, pp. 56-57). I examine these critiques as they relate to the historical and contemporary essentializing discourses that have constructed black women as sexual objects. I show that black women rappers' representations reveal as much about their individual experiences as they help to make more complex our shared understanding of the underlying intersections of, and sometimes tensions among race, gender, class, age, and sexuality. I also show that in making notions of black women's identities more complex, black women rappers and their texts perform pedagogically.

As black women rappers construct representations for their publics, they "inscribe whose knowledge and what knowledge counts" (Munro, 1998b, p. 3). They participate in curricular acts of representation (Castenell and Pinar, 1993; Munro, 1998b). According to Banks and Esposito (2002), representations matter because viewers/readers make meaning of their lives and those of others based on representations. Banks and Esposito also maintain that representations reflect our culture as much as they help to create it. Situated in the current cultural movement of hip hop, black women rappers' writing and performance of lyrics are examples of educational phenomena that Pinar (2001) says happen outside the school, "those pedagogical elements of political and social movements (such as the anti-lynching campaign), and individuals (such as Ida B. Wells) whose political or racial or feminist labor was in a profound sense performed as pedagogical" (p. 26). Two women rappers I include in my study, Missy Elliott and Eve,

seem to understand the teaching potential of their work. Missy Elliott reveals this awareness:

> Women in hip hop are more positive. You're almost giving that mother instinct, and you think about the children. Not to say anything bad about the males, but from their standpoint, it's more, 'Yo, it's cool right now to talk about this.' I have to extend further cause kids respect entertainers. Whether you want it or not, you are a role model. I'm going to be talking to kids about abuse, cause I went through watching my father abuse my mother, and I was sexually abused at eight. There's so many people being abused or watching their parents fight, and they need to know how you got over it and what they can do. We should touch more positive stuff these days, cause the world is getting crazier and crazier. (Missy quoted in Oumano, 1999, para. 26)

Though Missy Elliott constructs the role of teacher as "ideologically congruent with women's supposed innate nurturing capacities" (Munro, 1998b, p. 3), she still understands that her work has pedagogical potential. Eve is especially reflective about her role as teacher and her power to speak back to the stereotypical images of black women:

> I'm conscious of me being an entertainer and having a voice. I feel I do have to teach along the way. I'm only 22 and got a lot more to learn, but I feel I know enough about respecting myself that I can pass that on. I have to say something to know that I kind of made a difference, or at least made people know that I stand for something other than just wanting to make somebody shake their ass or sing my songs. (Eve quoted in Edwards, 2001, p. 126)

My analysis of women rappers' texts reveals that they perform pedagogically in the following ways: the expression of the individualistic (or personal) to reveal the collective (or communal), the use of themes relevant to black feminist theory, and the construction of contradictory representations. The women rappers I study often tell their tales using first-person narrative, a practice commonly used by all rappers. However, black women rappers make comment on communal concerns most often through the use of the personal. Telling tales of individual black women, sometimes autobiographical

stories, seems to be the means by which black women rappers help to make black women's collective concerns real and available to audiences. I am not as interested in whether or not these women's creations are true to their life experiences as I am interested in how their representations of individual black women speak to the collective identities of larger communities of black women.

The themes most often addressed by the women rappers I study include reconceptualizations of heterosexual courtship, the significance of self-definition, and the connections between physical, economic, and sexual freedoms (Rose, 1994). These are also themes evident in black feminist theory (Davis, 1998; hooks, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1998; Lorde, 1984; Rose, 1994). My study reveals that the women rappers' texts I have chosen for analysis express a kind of feminism that is centered in contradiction, a feminism that seeps through the "fissures of patriarchal discourses" (Davis, 1998, p. xi). Morgan (1999) labels this feminism "hip hop feminism" and defines it in relation to the complicated context of her (and my) generation, the "post-Civil Rights, post-feminist, post-soul children of hip hop" (p. 61). She says:

> We have little faith in inherited illusions and idealism. We are the first generation to grow up with all the benefits of Civil Rights (i.e., Affirmative Action, government-subsidized educational and social programs) and the first to lose them. The first to have the devastation of AIDS, crack, and black-on-black violence makes it feel like a blessing to reach twenty-five. Love no longer presents itself wrapped in the romance of basement blue lights, lifetime commitments, or the sweet harmonies of The Stylistics and The Chi-Lites. Love for us is raw like sushi, served up on sex platters from R. Kelly and Jodeci. Even our existences can't be defined in the past's simple terms: house nigga vs. field nigga, ghetto vs. bourgie, BAP vs. boho because our lives are usually some complicated combination of all of the above. (pp. 61-62)

My work takes up Morgan's call to define a feminism that "samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative,

and powerful" (p. 62). I identify black women rappers' texts as sites for the feminism defined by Morgan. I show how some black women rappers contribute to the development of black feminist thought—how they help to complicate and expand it as they make it more accessible to a wider range of black women. The feminism that emerges from the women rappers' texts I study is about talking back (hooks, 1989) to essentializing discourses that have defined black women in demeaning ways and pushing boundaries set within the confines of an environment oppressive to women. Black women rappers' feminism is not always positive, empowering, or socially responsible. However, all of their messages are ultimately educative because in one way or another, they speak to the significance of self-defined knowledge by black women.

Significance of Study

The curriculum studies field has much to gain from an analysis of black women rappers' self-defined knowledge. I identify an urgent need in educational discourse for research which recognizes black women rappers as legitimate writers/producers of knowledge and which examines that knowledge using black women-centered theoretical frameworks. I consider my study significant to the curriculum field because it is an effort toward a deeper understanding—a critical, theorized understanding—of the knowledge young black women produce about our identities and experiences. My study is also significant in its effort to help build a base in curriculum studies for theorizing that attends to the complexities—contradictions really—of black women's lives rather than the avoidance of them in favor of an "essential[ized] black female subject" (Carby, 1992, p. 192). According to Henry (1998), educational research still tends to represent black women as "randy, overbearing matriarchs and/or promiscuous, slovenly welfare mothers,

responsible for our children's academic difficulties" (p. 159). My project aims to deconstruct such narrow constructs of black women, examining instead our identities as a "nexus of subjectivities, in relations of power, which are constantly shifting, rendering them at one moment powerful and at another powerless" (Walkerdine, 1981, quoted in Henry, p. 159).

I am committed to conducting research in which black women are "subjects rather than objects, the imaginers rather than the imagined" (Henry, 1998, p. 159). As I work, I make a conscious effort to "study us on our own terms," an approach that Henry says is rarely taken in educational literature (p. 158). Using black feminist theory to inform my readings of black women rappers' texts, I work against the tendency in curriculum theory in particular and the predominantly white academy in general to marginalize black feminist thought, the tendency to "relegate [black women] to the footnotes, occasional lines, a few meager paragraphs, or a couple of pages" (p. 156).

I resist reading black women's texts through a white theoretical lens, for as Lorde (1984) warns, "if we do not define ourselves we will be defined by others for their use and to our detriment" (p. 45). Instead, I place black women and the knowledge we create at the center of my study, so as to generate theory in a way that "decenter[s] the white patriarchal gaze…decenter[s] the usual subject [which] includes white women…[and] looks at Blackness with a new eye" (hooks quoted in Dash, 1992, pp. 40-41). This kind of examination is what the curriculum field needs to create a knowledge base about young black women and question racist and sexist assumptions embedded in that knowledge. It is the kind of analysis I hope will ultimately help to "change and

deconstruct a contaminated knowledge base that supports racist/capitalist patriarchy" (Lewis, 1997, p. 49).

My effort to help change extant knowledge about black women in curriculum studies comes at a time when the curriculum field is "moving and shifting" (Pinar, 1998, p. xiv). According to Weaver (2002), curriculum theory, in particular, is "opening up new vistas for intellectual exploration" (p. 3). Curriculum theory now includes research on the ways young people use music as a site for identity articulation and contestation. My study joins this research and hopefully reflects "the new terrains being occupied, borders crossed, the new identities constructed, assumed, and contested" in curriculum theory and in the realm of the popular (Pinar, p. xv). My analysis of black women rappers' cultural productions is intended to help build on and extend the scholarship of curriculum theorists who write about youth cultures and music. None of them focus specifically on women rappers and their texts nor do they locate their theoretical base in black feminist thought, but together they offer important themes that frame my analysis. First, popular culture texts are pedagogical in and of themselves, not just as add-on resources for teachers to scaffold more traditional curriculum materials. Second, popular culture texts are complex and contradictory, often challenging and maintaining the status quo all at once. Third, music is an important site of resistance for African Americans to negotiate and represent their identities. I am concerned with these three issues as they specifically relate to questions about black women rappers and their texts. What kinds of pedagogies do black women rappers enact? What can we learn from their texts? How do black women rappers represent black women's identities? How are these representations sometimes contradictory? What critiques are black women rappers offering to their

audiences about black women's experiences? How do these critiques connect to the historical and contemporary essentializing discourses that have represented black women in static and demeaning ways? To address these issues, I choose black feminist thought as the theoretical context for my examination of black women rappers' texts.

Method

I began studying the ways in which black women rappers represent the intersections of, and sometimes tensions among race, gender, class, age, and sexuality by immersing myself in the larger culture of women's raps. My initial goal during this phase was to collect and review as many texts as I could find by contemporary black women rappers. I did not set predetermined criteria for selection. My only requirement for the texts I collected during the process of immersion was that the rappers had to be women and their albums had to be current or new releases. In the beginning stages of the study, I did not exclude past generations of women rappers, such as Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and Salt-n-Pepa, because I knew that their texts provided important historical context for my analysis. I was most interested, however, in women rappers' texts that were relevant to today's social context and that had not been studied before by feminist critics.

During the immersion phase, I bought many women rappers' CDs; listened to their songs; watched their movies; subscribed to mainstream and independent (or underground) hip hop periodicals, namely Vibe, The Source, XXL, Red Eye, Doula, and Blu; searched the Internet regularly for commentary about women rappers on hip hop websites; read autobiographies written by Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, and T-Boz and the hip hop novel The Coldest Winter written by Sister Souljah; searched for academic

journal articles on the current generation of women rappers; recorded women rappers' videos on BET, MTV, and VH1; watched women rappers' live television performances on music awards shows; and reviewed Sisters in the Name of Rap and Nobody Knows My Name, two documentaries about women's participation in rap.

To begin the actual textual analysis, I listened to hundreds of songs and read through lyrics by many black women rappers including Missy Elliott, Eve, Lauryn Hill, Rah Digga, Mia X, Da Brat, Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, Trina, Bahamadia, Mystic, and Queen Pen. Realizing the importance of authorship, I decided to focus my reading and listening to those songs written by black women rappers themselves. I transcribed lyrics on my own, or in some cases where available, copied lyrics from Internet databases; I checked the accuracy of the Internet lyrics against the actual recordings of the songs. I listened to and read through lyrics until common themes began to emerge across songs with similar content, and I placed small groups of songs into provisional thematic categories. I kept returning to women rappers' songs that shocked me, resonated with my own story, and/or prompted me to re-think my own black woman struggles with self-love, self-definition, and self-sufficiency. The women rappers whose songs addressed these three themes most often included Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, Eve, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, Mia X, Da Brat, and Queen Pen. I selected these women's texts for analysis because their stories reveal experiences and struggles familiar to many black women.

Due to the paucity of research on black women rappers in academic journals, I read interviews with and articles on black women rappers in mainstream and independent periodicals. These publications provided me with valuable biographical information about these women rappers' lives, their intent for particular songs, and sometimes their

understanding of their roles as performers and businesswomen. I used the magazine articles and what the women rappers are quoted as saying in them to introduce the women rappers whose texts I analyze and to develop the overall themes of the dissertation, specifically power, representation, and pedagogy.

After grouping songs according to themes and studying interviews and articles, I realized that black feminist theory would provide the best theoretical context for my analysis. I completed the analysis from a black feminist curriculum studies perspective utilizing an intersectional framework with a specific focus on raced, classed, and gendered representations (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1993).

The Chapters

In the introductory chapter, I explain my personal connections to the project, the purpose of the project, research questions, and significance of the project in the curriculum studies field. Chapters 2 through 4 comprise an extended literature review. My purpose in writing such a lengthy review is to explain my study's positioning in the field of curriculum theory, to discuss some historical context for women's participation in rap, and to examine black women critics' analyses of black women rappers' texts.

In Chapter 2, entitled "Women Rappers Enter the Curriculum Conversation," I review Sound Identities: Popular Music and the Cultural Politics of Education (1999) edited by Cameron McCarthy, Glenn Hudak, Shawn Miklaucic, and Paula Sauukko, Popular Culture and Critical Pedagogy: Reading, Constructing, Connecting (2000) edited by Toby Daspit and John. A. Weaver, and KRS-ONE Going Against the Grain: A Critical Study of Rap Music As A Postmodern Text (2002) written by Priya Parmar. These curriculum scholars' examinations of male rap performers and their texts that

explore the many ways in which rap is pedagogically valuable provide a theoretical foundation for my study of women rappers' texts. In this chapter, I also outline the six sociopolitical factors that black male cultural critic Bakari Kitwana (2002) says emerged in the 1980s and 1990s to help shape the ways in which the hip hop generation views the world. I reference his work in this chapter because it provides an understanding of the larger U.S. social-political-economic backdrop in which hip hop was born and still lives.

In Chapter 3, entitled "Representin' For the Ladies: An Overview of Women's Participation in Rap," I review three important works about the complicated history of women's participation in rap. Nancy Guevara and Cheryl Keyes discuss the multiple ways in which women have constructed their identities and gained more control over their images in the discourse of rap in "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin'" (Guevara, 1996), "'We're More than a Novelty, Boys': Strategies of Female Rappers in the Rap Music Tradition" (Keyes, 1993), and "Daughters of the Blues: Women, Race, and Class Representation in Rap Music Performance" (Keyes, 2002). My review of these works reveals that women rappers' representational choices have moved through three stages.

In the earliest days of hip hop, women rappers mostly defined themselves in relation with or in opposition to male rappers. These early women performers utilized feminine styles to distinguish themselves from male performers. For example, women graffiti artists preferred softer colors—mostly pastels—to the dark colors that men often chose, and women rappers dressed in high heels and mini skirts to differentiate themselves from male rappers. Later, women rappers defined themselves by inverting and/or appropriating male performance behaviors. Resisting (hetero)sex symbol personas, women rappers became "hard" like their male peers to avoid being labeled

weak and to gain credibility as legitimate emcees. Most recently, women rappers have chosen self-definition. My review in this chapter shows women rappers' different strategies of representation to gain legitimacy in the industry and their movement away from male-identified images to those like the Fly Girl, the Queen, and the Lesbian, the figure least defined in relation to male culture.

In Chapter 4, entitled "Framing the Stories of 'Sweet Mamas' and 'Bad Sistas': A Review of Two Critiques of Blues and Rap Women's Texts," I shift my discussion from women artists defining themselves as performers to textual analyses of women musicians' lyrics. Tricia Rose and Angela Davis are black women theorists important to my study. I review their work together in this chapter because both have written analyses of texts by black women performers that serve as models for my own study of women rappers' texts, and they write their analyses using a dialogic framework that calls attention to the ways in which the texts they study communicate with larger historical discourses.

In "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," a chapter from the all-important Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (1994), Rose suggests a complex framework for understanding black women rappers' sexual narratives that takes into account their relation to multiple discourses. Unlike other cultural critics, Rose resists placing black women rappers' texts in complete opposition to those of their male peers. Instead, she maintains that black women rappers are in conversation, in "dialogue," with one another, other black women, black men, and with the larger American culture. Rose examines women rappers' sexual narratives in relation to a variety of discourses so as to "consider the ways in which

women rappers work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture" (p. 147). Black heterosexual relationships, the significance of black women's voices, and black women's public expressions of physical and sexual freedom are three important themes most often found in women rappers' texts. Rose insists that these three themes must be situated within women rappers' dialogue with various other discourses, such as male rap discourses, sexualized representations of black women in historical discourses, feminist theory, and black feminist theory. Because a dialogic framework does not allow for binary oppositions between men and women emcees and provides space for black women's simultaneous support and critique of black male rappers, it is useful for the examination of black women's raps. After Rose explains dialogism as a useful framework for the analysis of women rappers' texts, she divides the rest of the chapter into four sections, which I review carefully. In each section, she analyzes texts of older generation women rappers like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, and Salt-n-Pepa.

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism (1998) is Angela Davis' analysis of the recorded performances of early twentieth century blues women singers Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. Even though Davis' text is not an analysis of cultural productions by black women rappers, it is useful to my study because of the relevance of Davis' overall argument and the themes she develops in each of her chapters. Understanding blues women's music as a site for "examining a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities" (p. xv), Davis locates moments in blues women's songs in which "hints of feminist attitudes emerge from their music through fissures of patriarchal discourses" (p. xi). Davis'

examination of the texts of blues women informs my study of women rappers in that she uses a dialogic framework to analyze the relationships among race, gender, class, and sexuality in the representation of black women's identities through popular music. She uncovers the ways in which blues women played with blues conventions and themes to express a consciousness that working-class black women of the time would understand and from which they could learn, perhaps become empowered. Davis organizes her analysis around significant themes that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday addressed in their songs, and I review the chapters that are thematically tied to my own readings of black women rappers' texts.

In Chapter 5, entitled "Roll Call: Introducing the Women MCs…," I provide biographical context for Missy, Eve, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina, the five women rappers who play significant roles in my research. This chapter is a collection of biographical details from several mainstream journal sources about each of the five women. For each woman rapper's story, I begin with some biographical details and then I address issues that emerged from the journal articles about each woman rapper in her roles as businesswoman, performer, writer, artist, and cultural icon. To explain these issues and to support my claims about each woman rapper, I include what they are quoted as saying about themselves in the articles. In (re)telling the stories of the five women rappers featured in this chapter, I am most interested in offering biographical details that resonate with my own personal struggles as well as those that black women face collectively. Black women rappers' stories reveal experiences familiar to many black women: our struggle to define ourselves rather than be mis(represented) by others, our struggle for respect and treatment as peers in male-dominated work spaces, our struggle

to express our sexual selves, our struggle against violence by male partners in heterosexual relationships, and our struggle to build community and mobilize ourselves.

In Chapter 6, entitled " 'You a Bitch, I'm a Bitch, We All Bitches in this Motherfuckin' Game': An Analysis of the Naming Practices of Black Women Rappers," I focus on the issue of naming. I use naming to mean more than the ascribing of a proper name to a given individual, for as Gilmore (1994) cautions: "Proper names assert an identity and continuity between the self and language, between signifier and signified, and cover over the differences produced by discourse" (p. 87). I use naming to refer to larger, more collective acts of constructing or defining images. This kind of naming can be a source of empowerment, an important movement in the process of creation influencing the social construction of a self (hooks, 1989). I do not mean a "unitary, autonomous, universal, and static" self that Munro (1998b) points out has "functioned as the basis for essentialized notions of woman" (p. 35). Rather, following Gilmore, I like to think of name as "a potential site of experimentation" (p. 93). Name then takes on the possibility for play, contestation, fluidity, change, multiplicity. To think of naming in this way has political force for black women because we have already been inscribed in very narrow terms by others and even silenced in public discourses when we have tried to define who we are.

My analysis in this chapter builds on this notion of naming with particular emphasis on the naming practice of a particular group of black women rappers. In the process of reading through multiple songs by various black women rappers, I found an interesting similarity among them: a significant number of women rappers choose the label "bitch" when referring to themselves. I examine their choice and its meaning

asking the following questions in this chapter: Why do these women choose "bitch" to name themselves? What meanings are already inscribed in the term, and what new meanings, if any, do these women inscribe? How are we to describe the material, political, even pedagogical effects of these women's naming practice?

In Chapter 7, entitled "The Rap on Sexual Desire, Sexual Politics, and Black Lesbian Sexuality: An Analysis of the Sexual Representations of Black Women Rappers," I focus on reading women rappers' representations of black women's sexualities. Black women's sexualities[4] are ideologically situated between race and gender, where the black woman sexual subject is often rendered invisible and voiceless (Hammonds, 1997b). At this juncture, which Hammonds describes as "a point of erasure" (p. 177) and which Crenshaw (1992) describes as "a location that resists telling" (p. 403), black women are often prevented from resisting negative images and crafting sexually empowering narratives. Instead, we are left with images that do us immeasurable harm.

Within the "normalizing"[5] assumptions of heterosexism, being a black woman signals the "wild, out-of-control hyperheterosexuality of excessive sexual appetite" (Collins, 2000, p. 129). Black women are (mis)represented in this system as the hyper-Other: a sexual deviant comparable to an animal (Walker, 1981, quoted in Collins). These negative sexual images of black women are, of course, still prevalent in public

[4] I am making a conscious effort to use the plural term *sexualities* to emphasize the multiple ways black women perform sexuality.

[5] Collins (2000) defines the normalization of heterosexuality:

> Assumptions of heterosexuality operate as a hegemonic or taken-for-granted ideology—to be heterosexual is considered normal, to be anything else is to become suspect. The system of sexual meanings associated with heterosexism becomes normalized to such a degree that they are often unquestioned (p. 129).

discourses. We only need to turn on the television, open a magazine, listen to a song, or watch a film to discover the multiple ways—sometimes subtle, sometimes not—in which black women are objectified as a collection of sexual parts. Consequently, we have a very narrow view of black women's sexualities (Hammonds, 1997a). According to hooks (1998), black women are still "marked by shame" and plagued by "nineteenth-century black female obsessions with bodily cleanliness, repression of the erotic, [and] denial of sexual presence and desire" (p. 69). "Notions that black females were inherently licentious, driven by animalistic sexual cravings which could not be controlled" have never left us (hooks, p. 69). We still tend to emphasize the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of sexuality while underanalyzing pleasure, exploration, and agency (Hammonds, 1997a).

Black women rappers, in contrast, construct texts that often do not emphasize the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of sexuality. Choosing these texts for analysis in the seventh chapter, I locate lyrics written by black women rappers that demonstrate how they teach their audiences about heterosexual relationships between black women and men. I discuss how these women rappers communicate sexual desire and pleasure in heterosexual sex acts, how they link power and sexuality in expressions of black women's identities, and how they queer the space of hip hop by offering representations of black lesbian sexuality. In considering the complexity of these women rappers' sexual expressions, I ask the following questions: What do these women rappers have to say about sex, sexuality, and control over black women's bodies? How do these women articulate sexual desire? How do they communicate in their lyrics, if at all, black women's resistance to sexual objectification, sexual oppression, and even sexual violence

in relationships with black men? To what extent do these women affirm patriarchal notions of sexual roles of male and female lovers? Do some lyrics ever move out of heterosexist discourse and make room for queer readings and/or offer representations of black lesbian sexuality?

I conclude the dissertation with a discussion of the pedagogical implications of my study for curriculum theory and my plans for future research.

CHAPTER TWO
WOMEN RAPPERS ENTER THE CURRICULUM CONVERSATION

Introduction

Rap is everywhere. From the ghetto to the suburbs, from Martin Luther King, Jr., Boulevard to Wall Street, from the city block to the college campus, rap is consumed by both young black America and young White America. It is a phenomenon, a culture, a way of life, too important for educators to ignore. Rap culture speaks to young people—its hyper(black)masculine hard edge, its propensity for constant change, its tendency toward contradiction, its over-the-top braggadocio, its privileging of the individual, its spirit of rebelliousness, its take-over of American popular culture. Despite its widespread popularity among school age youth, rap music has not received enough scholarly attention by theorists in curriculum and pedagogy. Deemed unimportant and unworthy of academic inquiry due to its "low culture" status, rap music has been relegated to the margins of educational discourse. Rap is not the kind of music that historically has been the object of study in schools, yet it is a form with which many school youth are very familiar. They use it to negotiate their definitions of self and how they represent themselves to the world. Constantly changing, rap influences how many students express all of who they are—their style, language, class, race, sexuality, and gender.

Though I situate my project in the relatively recent strand of scholarship in curriculum studies on popular culture and pedagogy, I have been unable to locate any work which places black women rappers and the texts they create at the center of study. I have had to rely on curriculum studies scholars' writing that broadly focuses on rap music mostly from a critical theory perspective (Daspit and Weaver, 2000; Kamberelis &

Dimitriadis, 1999; Koza, 1999; McLaren, 1999; Parmar, 2002; Walcott, 1999). Black women rappers and their texts are mostly omitted from these analyses, and when they are included, they are only marginally discussed. However, a few curriculum theorists have asked questions and raised issues that further my thinking about and analysis of women rappers' cultural productions. In this chapter, I review Sound Identities: Popular Music and the Cultural Politics of Education edited by McCarthy, Hudak, Miklaucic, and Sauukko, Popular Culture and Critical Pedagogy: Reading, Constructing, Connecting (2000) edited by Daspit and Weaver, and KRS-ONE Going Against the Grain: A Critical Study of Rap Music As A Postmodern Text (2002) written by Priya Parmar. These curriculum scholars' examinations of male rap performers and their texts that explore the many ways in which rap is pedagogically valuable provide a theoretical foundation in curriculum studies for my study of women rappers' texts.

Before I begin my review of these three works in the curriculum studies field that focus on rap music, I outline the six sociopolitical factors that black male cultural critic Bakari Kitwana (2002) says emerged in the 1980s and 1990s to help shape the ways in which the hip hop generation views the world. I reference his work in this chapter because it provides an understanding of the larger U.S. social-political-economic backdrop in which hip hop was born and still lives. First, Kitwana points to the mainstreaming of rap music and the increasing visibility of black youth in mainstream popular culture as significant to the formation of a hip hop generation identity. With greater access to larger audiences than any other previous generation of black musicians, rappers can pass on urban black culture (in a commodified form) to people (including black people) across the globe. When rap began to outsell other music genres in 1998,

mainstream American corporations like AT&T, The Gap, Levi's, Sprite, Coke, PepsiCo., Burger King, McDonald's, Tommy Hilfiger, and JCPenney, to name a few, utilized rap culture to market their products (p. 10).

The second influence that Kitwana names is globalization. A restructuring of the world economy due in part to the international trade agreements NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) and GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) resulted in mega-corporations, "some with economies larger than most countries" (p. 11). Kitwana maintains that even though these mega-corporations are responsible for the worldwide popularity of rap and an increase in wealth for some young black folks, they are also to blame for the increasing disparity between the haves and have-nots that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s in this country. Kitwana explains the material effects of globalization on young blacks:

> No real growth of the Black middle class occurred until the very end of the 1990s, when Black poverty rates began to decline for the first time in more than twenty years. During the 1980s and 1990s, young Blacks faced the realities of rising rates of unemployment, Black youth reliance on the underground economy, particularly the crack-cocaine explosion of the 1980s, and the simultaneous boom in incarceration rates. (p. 13)

The third factor affecting hip hop generation worldviews is what Kitwana calls "the illusion of integration" (p. 13). The Civil Rights Movement generation fought and won an end to legalized segregation. However, segregation still continues for our generation in fact, if not by law, in "an America that preaches democracy and inclusion" (p. 13). We have been promised equal access and opportunity, but the reality today is that we struggle against discrimination in education, housing, health care, employment, and in too many other areas.

Fourth, Kitwana explains the impact of public policy regarding criminal justice on the hip hop generation. Citing the Reagan Administration's "War on Drug" policies, the Clinton Administration's violence control legislation, and Bureau of Justice statistics, Kitwana maintains that racist federal legislation has caused a prison crisis for African American men, ages 20-29. Approximately one million black men are under correctional supervision, and almost half of the prison population is African American. Nearly one-third of all 20-29-year-old black males, the hip hop generation age group, are caught in the criminal justice system somehow; either they are incarcerated, on probation, or on parole (pp. 13-18).

A fifth influence on hip hop generation worldviews is the media's demonization of black youth. Blamed for the decline in morality in America over the past two decades, young blacks are often portrayed as overly materialistic, obsessed with expensive jewelry, cars, homes, liquor, and clothes. Young black men in particular are often paraded in handcuffs in local news crime reports, giving the impression that black men are dangerous and to be feared. The images of black street culture, like those of black men as pimps and gangstas and black women as bitches and whores, have become the (mis) representations of black life. The complexity of black identity is too often reduced to a small set of Birth of a Nation-style images: black men as brutes/rapists and black women as cunning whores. The final factor impacting the hip hop generation is the decline in the quality of life for young blacks during the 1980s and 1990s. Kitwana provides statistics that show dramatic increases in gang activity, gun homicides, suicides, and AIDS among black youth.

The six characteristics that Kitwana lists regarding the hip hop generation are important for curriculum scholars to understand in relation to the texts that young black rappers create. I offer a brief outline of them here so that the following review of curriculum scholars' writing on rap is contextualized within the story of the social, economic, and political forces of the 1980s and 1990s that have shaped hip hop culture. These forces are also helpful in understanding the world in which our young students must define themselves and negotiate their positionings.

Sound Identities: Popular Music and the Cultural Politics of Education

Sound Identities: Popular Music and the Cultural Politics of Education (1999), edited by McCarthy, Hudak, Miklaucic, and Sauukko, expands the limited existing knowledge base on the connections between the study of popular music and youth identity in the field of education. A collection of 17 essays organized into four sections, Sound Identities introduces teachers/theorists to scholarship on a variety of kinds of music and the complex roles they play in the lives of school youth. The first section "Music in the Nation" contains four essays that focus on rap, specifically how it gets represented and how black youth make meaning(s) of it. The second section "Music in the Postcolony and in the Diaspora" contains five essays that focus on the tensions in various forms of postcolonial music. The four essays in the third section "Music in the Contested Metropolis" examine rock music and its connection to suburban youth identity and American politics. The final four essays in the last section "The Pedagogy of Musical Affect" discuss some practical pedagogical implications of popular music.

In the introduction to Sound Identities, the editors explain four general purposes for the collection. First, the editors hope to show the importance of popular culture,

specifically popular music, to the field of curriculum studies. They maintain that through popular culture and popular music, "the differential identities and interests of school youth are constructed, reworked and coordinated, and then infused into the expressive and instrumental orders of schooling" (p. 3). Students bring to schooling spaces what they see on television, watch in films, listen to on the radio, read in magazines, and search for on the Internet. All of this constitutes a knowledge base from which teachers can learn about the worlds of students.

Second, the editors hope to foreground cultural studies analysis as a viable theoretical and methodological approach to the study of schooling. They define cultural studies analysis as "the plurality of critical research strategies (phenomenology, semiotics, ethnography, literary analysis, situated history and political economy)" (p. 3). The contributors to the collection employ these strategies in an effort to provide more thorough understandings of the popular culture texts they read.

The third objective is to globalize the conversation about the relationship between popular culture and identify formation of school youth in various nations. The editors maintain that moving toward a more holistic and global study of popular culture and schooling is necessary because of a "new world order in which 'center-periphery relations' are the crude summaries of the hierarchical distribution of repressed interests, needs, and desires of dominant and subaltern groups in first world and third world societies" (p. 3). The editors say that representations in popular culture and popular music reflect these interests, needs, and desires and reveal much about what school youth have to say about the worlds in which they live.

Finally, the editors stress the need for a critical examination of popular culture texts that does not romanticize them. The editors realize that popular culture texts are not always transformative, especially in schooling spaces, and that popular music, in particular, offers contradictory messages. The authors explain the tensions:

> Music is playing an ever increasing, pivotal role in the lives of youth as the vehicle of new and old ideas and fantasies and as the site of the work of youthful imagination. But music is also the location of the hegemonic thrusts of the culture industry, the site of the fabrication of new market-susceptible subjectivities, and the site of the production and reproduction of conservative ideas outright. (p. 7)

These tensions must be examined, not ignored, if we are to gain better insight into the lives of the young people we teach. It is also necessary that we teach them how to expose and make sense of the contradictions in the music they consume to negotiate their identities.

All of the contributors to Sound Identities present substantive essays that grapple with the tensions of popular music's impact on young people and on schooling spaces. I am most interested in the first four essays in the collection because they focus on rap music; however, none of them focuses on women rappers specifically. Despite this omission in the first set of essays, the authors pose interesting questions about representations of young black urban life. For the most part, the issues discussed are not directly related to my study, so my review of each of the essays will include only those issues which add necessary context for my own study on women rappers. The common thread among them is that while the authors agree that rap offers critiques on a variety of social injustices facing urban black communities like poverty, racism, sexism, and police brutality, they also show that rap offers contradictory messages which seem to reinforce

misogyny, homophobia, and material excess. I arrange my review by beginning with the essay that has the least relevance to my study and moving toward the essay with the most applicability.

Least related to my study on women rappers is the essay by George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis (1999) entitled "Talkin' Tupac: Speech Genres and the Mediation of Cultural Knowledge." The authors say that their original focus changed as the study progressed. Originally, they intended to examine the connections between rap and youth identity construction, but, as the study continued, rap emerged as a kind of backdrop for middle school students' utilization of specific speech genres, namely the television talk show, to make sense of male rapper Tupac Shakur's life and death. Because the focus shifted to speech genres, the authors completed an analysis of the television talk show skits that the 10- to 12-year-old black subjects of the study performed about the real life conflict between male rappers Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. The results of the study reveal that the students used the television talk show to work out explanations for Tupac's death that were personal and not political. The students tended to attribute Tupac's death to the rivalry he had with fellow rapper Notorious B.I.G. over a woman, which the authors describe as "the exchange of sexual capital in the context of romantic betrayal," rather than more significant structural realities that could also explain their feud, such as an increase in black-on-black crime, oppression of black women, or widespread materialism (p. 139). Kamberelis and Dimitriadis explain the impact of a study on how middle school age children use speech genres:

> Examining how young people appropriate and transform specific speech genres as they think and talk about the culture(s) they inhabit provides important understandings about how these genres enable and constrain their efforts to

> reproduce and resist the power arrangements that constitute their lives and to construct social knowledges and identities within these arrangements. (p. 119)

Even though the chapter has very little to do with my analysis of women rappers' lyrics, it still has very important pedagogical implications for schooling. Teachers can profit from understanding the ways in which young people make meanings of (rap) texts and the ways in which they define themselves in relation to (rap) texts.

Julia Koza's essay "Rap Music: The Cultural Politics of Official Representation" (1999) is not closely connected to my study, but it does provide valuable insights about the representation of rap culture by mainstream publications. For her study, Koza examined how three popular weekly news magazines, Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report, represented rap, rappers, and rap fans over a ten-year period (January 1983 through December 1992). Her close reading of 39 articles reveals how these three news magazines "participated in a construction and commodification of otherness, integrally related to the perpetuation of hegemony" (p. 66). Koza maintains that the magazines consistently represented rap as an "undesirable outsider" (p. 66), disturbing and dangerous to mainstream American culture. Even though there are no close connections between my study and Koza's, her conclusions about the representations of rap are useful as larger social context for my study. The public debate that has framed rap as negative, violent, misogynistic, homophobic, materialistic, ghetto, morally bankrupt—all-around dangerous—is important context in understanding an examination of women rappers' texts. I am most interested in what Koza says about the value of representations in the construction of definitions of self and the impact of using inside/outside binaries to frame the representation of rap in popular magazines.

Koza begins with a discussion of the importance of media representations in shaping our worldviews. They are inscribed on our collective and individual psyches and help to determine how we define others and ourselves. Koza draws on bell hooks (1992) to establish a connection between representation and issues of power. hooks explains how representations of race are used as an ideological foundation for unequal power relations:

> There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people. (hooks, p. 2)

Because representations are intricately connected to matters of power, they warrant "fierce critical interrogation" (hooks, p. 5). Koza's study is one such critical interrogation.

Koza's overall finding that popular magazines most frequently place rap, rappers, and rap fans on the negative side of good/bad and insider/outsider binaries is useful context for my study. Newsweek, Time, and U.S. News and World Report all represented rap as outside of mainstream American culture from 1983-1992. Following Tricia Rose (1994), Koza maintains that the articles suggested that rap was cause for alarm and containment. The articles made this suggestion in a variety of ways. First, they defined rap as a young urban (read black and working-class or poor) male music culture, and they traced rap's origins back to the "ghetto, " which Koza maintains is "a term not only suggesting a place apart, but also a place of otherness, at least from a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant perspective" (p. 73). The ghetto signifies danger and a particular

kind of blackness defined along class lines. Koza explains the race and class inflected representation of rap's origins:

> Articles that called rap the music from the streets were connecting it to a specific social-class location; however, as a location of otherness, streets were represented as undesirable places associated with crime, poverty, offal, and moral degradation. (p. 74)

Rap was also defined as a very lucrative industry for young black males, many of whom, the articles pointed out, were convicted of various crimes. The articles outlined how much various black male rappers and black rap executives earned in a given year and how much they spent on luxury houses, cars, and jewelry. Those rappers with prior criminal convictions were described as "ex-gang leaders" and "former drug dealers" turned "entrepreneurs" (pp. 74-75). Even though rappers live a real-life lifestyle more in keeping with rich (and even middle-class) white America than with the average black family in the hood, rappers were still represented as outsiders. Koza offers a possible explanation:

> If successful black rappers are viewed as a threat to hegemony and a challenge to some white middle-class values, specifically to beliefs about who is entitled to capital, how it should be acquired, and how it should be used, then mixed or negative portrayals of these rappers may be seen as attempts to reinforce dominant ideology and to keep black people 'in their place.' (p. 76)

Insider/outsider binaries were clearly marked in the magazines' representations of rap fans.

Toward the end of the decade, the magazines began to report changes in the "typical" rap fan. He was no longer a young black working-class male teenager from the projects; he was a young white middle-class male adolescent from the suburbs (pp. 76-77). The articles referred to this shift as a "crossover into the mainstream," a "movement

from black America into the mainstream of popular culture" (p. 77). In other words, the outside was moving to the inside; the margins were invading the center. The message was clear: Beware! Rap was on the loose. Some articles warned that these shifts would blacken or "poison" American popular culture, and the following headlines served as warning labels to the mainstream American public: "Polluting Our Popular Culture" (p. 77); "2 Live Pollutants" (p. 78), a specific reference to the rap group 2 Live Crew; and "Rap Music's Toxic Fringe" (p. 81). News articles constructed rappers and rap fans as a kind of hyper-other, what Koza calls the "other of others" (p. 79) and what hooks (1992) calls the "outer limits of outness" (p. 34). Placed on the margins of marginality, they were accused of inciting hatred against women, gays, Asians, Jews, whites, and the police (p. 79). Some articles even blamed rap for perpetuating racism against black folks because of its negative stereotypical images of blackness.

Koza says that the overwhelming majority of articles (85% in Time and Newsweek and all articles in U.S. News) associated rap with the following negative themes: violence, obscenity, hatred, crime, gangs, and anger (p. 80). For the most part, the articles did not frame their discussions of rap as an empowering public discourse, one with transformative pedagogical possibilities. It definitely was not an art form that could be utilized in schooling spaces with positive results for students and teachers. Following Rose (1991), Koza maintains that the connection the news articles made between rap and negativity was a strategy of black containment and a means toward preserving white supremacy (p. 82). Koza cites Rose who maintains that linking rap to negativity suggested that rap and the people and places associated with it were threatening and

needed to be policed. Rose explains the relation between fear and a discourse of containment:

> Young African Americans are positioned in fundamentally antagonistic relationships to the institutions that most prominently frame and constrain their lives. The public school system, the police, and the popular media perceive and construct them as a dangerous internal element in urban America—an element that must be policed. The social construction of rap and rap-related violence is fundamentally linked to the social discourse on Black containment and fears of a Black planet. (p. 279)

Overall, Koza's study reveals how the popular news media, often under the guise of objectivity, shaped a public conversation about rap. Their representations mostly offered incomplete, sometimes distorted, images of rap that ultimately worked to reinforce an existing social hierarchy. At the end of her essay, Koza reminds educators to always put the representations in so-called objective news stories as well as the representations in rap through "fierce critical interrogations" before deciding to utilize them in schooling spaces (pp. 91-92).

Rinaldo Walcott's essay "Performing the (Black) Postmodern: Rap as Incitement for Cultural Criticism" (1999) is another one of those "fierce critical interrogations" (hooks, 1992, p. 5) of rap. After defining conditions of black postmodernity, Walcott explains how rap is a black postmodern cultural form that challenges monolithic notions of blackness. He resists the tendency of cultural critics to contextualize rap as a mainly U.S. cultural phenomenon and instead calls on cultural critics to recognize and read rap as an African Diasporic art form. It is both "border-crosser and localized practice" (p. 10). His essay is important to my study on women rappers because I, like other cultural theorists Walcott critiques, situate women rappers' lyrics within/against larger American social discourses. Given that the focus of my study is on U.S. black women and black

women rappers, I have relied on a "History of rap, neatly packaged through an urban African American narrative" (p. 109) to help make meanings of women rappers' representations. In the following paragraphs, I review those parts of Walcott's essay that define the conditions of a black postmodernity and explain how rap is a black postmodern African Diasporic art form.

Walcott challenges a U.S.-centered history of rap and discusses rap's expansion out of African American communities. Rap has roots in Afro-Carribbean islands, and it has crossed borders, constantly moving and shifting into other communities, inside and outside of the United States. Walcott offers two reasons for rap's extension into places across the globe. The first is that rap and hip hop culture in general have become "hot" commodities; hip hop culture is the "in" culture right now. Everything about hip hop culture—styles of dress, dance, clothes, language—is widely considered cool. Walcott explains the impact of the commodification of rap:

> The mass marketing of rap and hip hop culture…both at home in the United States, and abroad, have meant that [both have] garnered much media attention as a desirable, needed, and demanded commodity. American capital has played a major role in the creation of desire and the dissemination of hip hop culture, as American capitalists sought and conquered "newer" markets (youth) and "new" products (rap) to market. (p. 99)

The second reason Walcott gives for rap's more global appeal is what rap offers to its listeners. Much of it is appealing because listeners identify with (or perhaps are seduced by) what rappers say. Fans across race, class, ethnicity, gender, and location connect with the music, its beats, and its content. To its fans, rap articulates the "personal and collective histories, cultures, memories, desires, needs, pleasures and disappointments" (p. 101) of many different kinds of people. Walcott attributes a

growing "citizenship" (p. 101) in the hip hop nation to rap's connectedness to what is real in the lives of everyday people of color—a collective sense of struggle—and its critiques of social problems and unjust power relations. Walcott comments on rap's situatedness in the everyday and its resistance to the status quo:

> Rap and hip hop culture is constituted from various threads and traces which often draw on the experiences of the everyday and the ordinary, in many cases to offer critiques of social relations, cultural practices, and societal attitudes. Many of the cultural practices of rap and hip hop challenge normative identity by either exaggerating the everyday or by bluntly and clearly challenging various articulations of the "normal." (p. 101)

Walcott points out that some cultural critics tend to conceptualize the hip hop nation as a single, unified, monolithic group of young black women and men. He suggests a black postmodernist framework for reading and understanding hip hop culture and its participants because it can serve as a "counter to emergent discourses of black nationalism and Afrocentrism which seek to produce narratives of black sameness" (p. 105). Walcott explains the reluctance of some black scholars to label their research/writing postmodernist, but he is also clear that postmodernist theories are at play in the work of black scholars who write against a monolithic blackness whether they accept the label or not. He does not dismiss some black scholars' resistance to the postmodernist label as simply their "fear of theory" (p. 105). Rather, he accepts their criticism of postmodernism as legitimate critique. He explains their two concerns about postmodernism:

> Postmodernism [has] been a theoretically elitist position that codified intellectual speech in ways that often did not lead to the decentering of the authority its proponents desired. The practices of indirection, circularity, collage, and hybridity have long been argued as important subversive strategies by black scholars. (p. 105)

Even though Walcott understands black scholars' reservations about postmodernism, he does believe in its potential for understanding and problematizing hip hop culture more thoughtfully and thoroughly. Walcott delineates several post-Civil Rights/postcolonial conditions, which he says are indicative of a changed reality for people of the Diaspora and which in turn help to define a particular black postmodernity. His list includes the following conditions:

> (a) the collapse of notions of a unified black body politic; (b) an excavation of past relations and an insistence on continued closer transglobal black connections and dialogues; (c) the emergence of black feminisms; (d) black queer theory and activism; (e) the varied representational practices of black artists and other cultural producers, with specific attention to the use of technology; (f) the continuation of the emergence of discourses of black difference and heterogeneity; and (g) the emergence of an anticolonial and postindependent "black world" and debates within, across, and outside that world. (p. 106)

These conditions reflect the milieu in which hip hop culture lives, and more specifically, they inform how rap is conceptualized, contextualized, and interpreted.

Walcott conceptualizes rap as a "source through which forms of black postmodernity might be explored" (p. 108). He supports his claim by explaining that the way in which rap songs are constructed, particularly the borrowing of beats from earlier songs and refashioning them into something new, is reflective of the postmodern practices of pastiche, collage, and bricolage (p. 108). He also says that rap can be read as a postmodern practice because it thrives on change, difference, and resistance.

Walcott concludes the chapter by showing how two Canadian rappers' songs are instructive on issues of nation and black identity. Of particular importance to my study is his commentary on Queen Latifah's video for her rap "Ladies First," which he calls a "diasporic and dialogic black Atlantic expression" (p. 111). In the video, Latifah plays a

military commander of African nations who symbolically changes the power structure of various countries from white-controlled to black-controlled. The video includes still shots of Winnie Mandela alongside African American women historical figures and scenes of ordinary South African women and men in the streets protesting. Walcott maintains that the video's representations are suggestive of "moments that exist beyond the strict confines of nation to address the more interesting and complex relations of trans-Atlantic identifications, historical relations, practices, memories, and desires" (p. 111).

Peter McLaren's essay "Gangsta Pedagogy and Ghettocentricity: The Hip Hop Nation as Counterpublic Sphere" (1999) is the most relevant to my study. Of particular importance is what McLaren says about male rappers' recoding of the label "nigger" and the images of material excess and misogyny in gangsta rap. McLaren is careful to point out that he does not conflate the two terms, rap and gangsta rap, and that the claims he makes are in reference to gangsta rap specifically. McLaren defines gangsta rap as an "oppositional political practice" (p. 40) with revolutionary potential, but he says it still remains a problematic cultural practice vulnerable to commodification and allied with capitalist interests. McLaren explains the complexity of gangsta rap's politics of resistance:

> While it [gangsta rap] points to the structural instability of capitalist America and the production of urban rage, and while it wages war against the white sentinels of the status quo, it remains ideologically aligned with capitalist interests, glorifying crass materialism and celebrating conspicuous consumption. As such, rap as a form of resistance can be conflictually located along a series of semantic axes; it varies, in other words, from song to song, artist to artist, and from listener to listener, depending upon the performative moments that are meant to be signified. (p. 40)

To appreciate gangsta rap's transformative potential, it is necessary to unravel its troubling contradictions. In an effort to do so, McLaren reviews a number of criticisms made against gangsta rap by scholarly and popular critics alike. The "gun-toting, weed-smoking, fucking-all-the-time bad nigga" narratives, glorification of material excess, rampant sexism and misogyny—McLaren explains (and problematizes) all of these by placing them in larger social contexts.

McLaren defends male rappers' re-visioning of the white racist label nigger into nigga, a kind of re-construction of a black male working-class street identity. Nigga is not only a label; it is an attitude, a way of life, a consciousness. McLaren and other male hip hop critics (Boyd, 1997; George, 1998; Kelley, 1996) regard the re-coding of the term and the creation of the nigga identity a political act by black men. McLaren says:

> Gangsta rap has creatively reworked and recoded in a socially transgressive and politically retaliatory manner the social meaning of the term in ways that distinguish it from the taboo term used by white racists and from the often self-hating inflections of the term expressed by black professionals. (p. 46)

I include what McLaren says about black male rappers re-coding of nigga because of its relevance to my discussion of black women rappers' re-appropriation of the label bitch. I maintain that when women rappers link the bitch identity to the hood and use it as a term of endearment when referring to each other, they do so with(in) and against the tradition of black men "ascribing new, potentially empowering meanings to nigger" (Kelley, p. 137). I ask in my study, do we grant black women rappers' re-visioning of bitch similar status?

McLaren problematizes the images of material excess in gangsta rap lyrics and videos. He offers two possible readings. First, he suggests that the boasts that black

male gangsta rappers make on their records about the lavish bling-bling lifestyle they lead—numerous luxury cars, expensive homes, designer clothes, one-of-a-kind jewelry, easy sex—are a "legitimation of capitalist social relations of consumption" that "occlude[s] a larger politics of liberation outside of commodity culture" (pp. 54-55). Additionally, he proposes a reading that contextualizes the materialistic images within a larger historical reality for black men in this country. He says:

> It's possible to overlook the sexism and the hyperbolizing of the black male-as-womanizer by focusing on the consumer trappings of the black rapper…Acquiring these 'trappings' becomes a form of resistance because they are not available to the average white or black subject. (p. 54)

I make a similar claim about black women rappers who celebrate the material benefits of their success on their rap records. I, too, suggest that black women rappers' boasting is in keeping with the theme of excess that sells records in American culture, particularly in the rap industry (Boyd, 1997). But I also propose that the images of material excess in some women rappers' lyrics and videos be understood within a larger American social context in which black women in this country struggle with "a lack of employment opportunities available for young women due to race and gender segmentation in the labor market" (Kelley, 1996, p. 143). I think it is necessary to examine black women rappers' identification with money and material possessions in their songs within/against patriarchal discourse and practice that has treated, imaged, and legally defined black women as property. I conclude that representations of black women in control of property and with the power to use wealth are important images of resistance in the patriarchal public sphere.

McLaren cites Angela Davis (1992) and bell hooks (1992) in his discussion of the misogynistic images in gangsta rap. They denounce the misogynistic images, but they do not attribute the problematic representations to black male gangsta rappers only. They explain that the expressions of misogyny in rap have their roots in the larger American patriarchal culture, specifically "an assertive patriarchal paradigm of competitive masculinity and physical prowess" (p. 35). Davis offers an alternative interpretation to the reading of black male gangsta rappers as "sociopathic and criminal" by recasting them as "gun-toting revolutionaries" (p. 34). Davis says:

> Many of the rappers call upon a market-mediated historical memory of the black movement of the sixties and seventies. The image of an armed Black man is considered the 'essence' of revolutionary commitment today. As dismayed as I may feel about this simplistic, phallocentric image, I remember my own responses to romanticized images of brothers (and sometimes sisters) with guns. (Davis quoted in McLaren, p. 34)

The representations that black women rappers offer are also multi-layered and often work against the narrow, objectifying representations of black women that black male gangsta rappers construct. McLaren says that black women rappers generally have managed to create representations that are more complex than either the "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy often found in gangsta rap. Focusing on Queen Latifah in particular, McLaren describes the force of her representations of black Nationalist women and welfare mothers:

> Queen Latifah (Dana Owens) has challenged racist white America's view of black women as 'welfare queens' and unwed mothers as well as the view of some black nationalists that women accept roles subordinate to men…Queen Latifah refuses the role given to the black woman within hip hop nationalism—that of Isis—which merely symbolizes the imperialist glories of Egypt and the African empire. Latifah's Afrocentric expression is remarkable, not only because it is devoid of the concomitant sexism of nationalism but because it challenges the masculine logic of nation as well. (p. 35)

Queen Latifah is one example of many rappers—men and women—who have managed to create the new identities on wax that McLaren says are most "refractory to commodification" and necessary for "a praxis of both opposition and possibility" (p. 55). These are the kinds of representations that have the most potential in changing how black men and women are imaged in public discourses.

Popular Culture and Critical Pedagogy: Reading, Constructing, Connecting

Building on the contributors' work in Sound Identities, Daspit and Weaver (2000) edit an important collection of essays entitled Popular Culture and Critical Pedagogy: Reading, Constructing, Connecting. Situated in critical pedagogy discourse, the collection is in keeping with the practical and theoretical focus of critical pedagogy: "to address the potential for multiple readings of popular cultural texts, the contradictory and shifting meanings of texts, and the shifting power struggles over control of texts" (p. xiv). The collection's essays are about various popular cultural texts, the meanings of the texts, and what happens when they enter schooling spaces. Covering a variety of popular cultural forms like film, cartoons, and rap, the essays are written from multiple perspectives to "suggest some alternative directions critical pedagogy can take in its critique of popular culture and education" (p. xiii).

Each of the essays in the first section answers the editors' call for a multiple readings approach to make meaning(s) of popular cultural forms. The editors stress that privileging one reading over others—for example, the teacher's interpretation over the students'—cannot account for the ever-changing meanings of texts. Understanding that texts often have contradictory meanings, the editors conclude:

> The dominance of one reading in a text becomes a form of political action that is shunning conversation and argument; therefore any reading of popular culture texts should reflect multiple readings that often contradict each other or act independently from each other. It means we purposively seek out those voices that do not fit our world view or our readings of popular culture texts. (p. xix)

Selecting only those texts with which teachers are familiar and with which they can easily take on the role of expert contributes to a teacher-centered pedagogical space. When teachers are willing to stretch what constitutes official classroom knowledge to include popular culture texts, they undermine traditional notions of what counts as suitable academic knowledge. The editors explain the dichotomy between academic knowledge and popular culture knowledge. Academic knowledge has been perceived as "canonical, the norm by which other sources of knowledge can be evaluated, decoded, reinterpreted, and co-opted" (p. xxiii), but popular culture knowledge has not been regarded as a legitimate form of knowledge worthy of scholarly attention. The editors explain the effects of this hierarchy between academic and popular culture knowledge on schooling spaces:

> Part of the disconnectedness, meaninglessness, and hopelessness that students, teachers, and administrators feel towards schooling are caused by academic discourses that promote the disconnectedness between school knowledge and popular culture knowledge. The academy's suspicion of popular culture…assists in creating a school culture that devalues the knowledge students, teachers, and administrators bring to the school. (pp. xxv-xxvi)

The editors suggest that viewing popular culture texts as "hypertexts" (p. xxiv) prevents the academic knowledge vs. popular culture knowledge dichotomy. The editors say that popular culture as a hypertext "changes and shifts in meaning as the reader/viewer of these texts reads, plays, manipulates, resists, and/or accepts them without monopolizing the meaning" (p. xxiv). Thus, understanding popular culture as a

hypertext is freeing and empowering for the reader/viewer. S/he no longer has to worry about "mastering the meaning of a text" because s/he becomes another "author" of the text who can create meaning from it (p. xxiv). Using the hypertext model, a split between academic knowledge and popular culture knowledge is not possible, for the focus is on the reader/viewer, not so much on the text, and the meanings s/he constructs. Pedagogical spaces are transformed when students and teachers are not programmed to find one "correct" meaning for a text they are studying together. The classroom becomes a space in which everyone is asked to participate in constructing knowledge.

The second section of the book deals with the issue of how scholars of popular culture and pedagogy view popular culture texts. The editors suggest that "critical theorists should begin to see popular culture texts as forms of critical pedagogy" because "these texts challenge power blocs while creating alternative visions of the world" (p. xxvi). In other words, popular culture texts are pedagogical in and of themselves because they offer messages that teach us about the ways young performers critique "power blocs" (p. xxvi). The editors explain how the television sitcom "Roseanne," pop singer Madonna, former basketball player Dennis Rodman, male rapper Ice Cube, and hip hop female trio TLC present critiques of class, sexuality, race, and gender. But they are also careful to point out that while valuing popular culture texts as forms of critical pedagogy, they are "not suggesting that popular culture texts are without contradictions and ambiguities" (p. xxvii).

Recognizing that all popular culture texts are "inscribed within a history and culture that is shaped by capitalism, consumerism, choice ideologies, white supremacy, sexism, and homophobia" (p. xxvii), the editors tell how each of the critiques by the

aforementioned performers is layered in contradictory meanings. Sometimes the critiques resist power blocs at the same time that they uphold them. The editors explain the pedagogical importance of these contradictory texts and what we should look for when studying them:

> Each one of these popular culture texts offers a pedagogy of possibility in which societal problems are addressed, silenced voices heard, and alternatives envisioned. We need to study the ways in which popular culture offers alternative possibilities just as much as it articulates or resists the agenda of power blocs. (p. xxvii)

Daspit and Weaver go on to discuss how rap and science fiction are two kinds of popular culture texts that are closely connected to critical pedagogy. I am more interested in what the editors have to say about rap. They define rap as a "counterculture" (p. xxvii) that comments on the social problems affecting both urban and suburban America. In addition, they say that rap is critical pedagogy because rappers construct stories that represent "the conditions of urban decay brought on by rabid capitalism" and "the frustrations of urban populations while providing the lyrical messages for constructing an alternative world" (p. xxvii). The editors illustrate the connection between critical pedagogy and rap by including an excerpt from the rap "Teachers Don't Teach Us Nonsense" by the rap group Leaders of the New School. In the rap, which is a critique of public school curriculum, Leaders of the New School claim that "public education is making us dumber" (p. xxviii). They describe public school curriculum as "lies, brainwashing, and nonsense" and call for end to a curriculum that "beats students down" (p. xxviii). Leaders of the New School ask teachers to "teach students something they can use" and to "teach students the truth" (p. xxviii).

The editors also include lyrics from a thematically similar song entitled "Take the Power Back" by rap/rock group Rage Against the Machine. They rap about a "Eurocentric" public school curriculum that "disses" students at the same time that it "teaches them to read and write," and they warn students not to be fooled by the "so-called facts" of the curriculum because they are a "fraud" (p. xxviii). Rage Against the Machine presents an alternative pedagogy to counter the effects of the public school curriculum when they say that their rap can "puncture the structure of lies" (p. xxviii). Rappers in the groups Rage Against the Machine and Leaders of the New School challenge public school curriculums that are racially biased, untruthful, and unrelated to students' real lives. They conceptualize a curriculum that asks students to question, think for themselves, and determine what is important. Daspit and Weaver summarize how the two raps are forms of critical pedagogy:

> Leaders of the New School and Rage Against the Machine envision a new curriculum that is not based on the foundation of fraud and nonsense, rote memorization, and disconnectedness but incorporates their personal experiences and fosters the development of a critical lens within students so they may connect their education to "the real" in order to construct a strategy to overcome the lies and begin the search for justice. (p. xxix)

Entitled "Rap Pedagogies: 'Bring(ing) the Noise' of 'Knowledge Born on the Microphone' to Radical Education," Daspit's chapter elaborates on the connection between rap music and critical pedagogy. Daspit divides the chapter into three sections. In the first section, he suggests that educators should no longer ignore popular culture and that they should look to rap music as a site for transformative pedagogy. When educators utilize popular culture as an integral part of the learning process, it validates who students are, what they like, and what they know. Daspit is cautious, however, in his call for the

inclusion of popular culture as academic subject matter in schooling spaces because he says students may view it as "an invasion of personal space" (p. 166). He explains:

> Since it is through investment in and expression of the popular that potentially emancipatory points of resistance and agency are located, the appropriation by schools of such possibly empowering cultural forms may ultimately disempower students. Forcing everyday student experiences into institutional frameworks where they are not "logically" associated must be approached cautiously lest we dismantle the very forces that offer liberatory experiences. (p. 166)

Daspit's point here is provocative. To retain popular culture's value inside schooling spaces, a transformation of those spaces is necessary. A transformed schooling space, one in which students' voices become as important (or more) than the teacher's voice of authority, is possible when students' experiences/knowledges become the central focus of the learning process. Infusing popular culture into a transformed pedagogical space allows us to ask ourselves along with Daspit, "How might a 'classroom,' a 'school,' an 'education' infused with popular culture manifest itself?" (p. 166) "How might popular culture reconfigure the meaning of schooling, the role of the teacher, and the message of the critical theorist?" (p. xxix) What can we as teachers learn from popular culture that can challenge us to rethink who we are and how we teach? What do students know about popular culture that can reshape who they are and how they learn?

Focusing his attention on one form of popular culture, rap music, Daspit describes a rap aesthetic that has pedagogical implications. Drawing on work by Houston Baker (1993), Daspit defines rap as a "hybrid" art form (p. 164). He maintains that it can be called a hybrid for at least two reasons. First, the music of rap depends on the sampling and mixing of beats from songs already in existence to produce a new song. Daspit quotes Rose's description (1994) of this process of sampling as both "deconstructive (the

taking apart of musical compositions) and recuperative (arranging beats in different ways to produce new sounds)" (p.170). The result of sampling and mixing is a hybrid musical composition. Second, rap originates in an urban context and crosses into a suburban one, blending both cultures in the processes of consumption and making meaning(s) of rap texts by listeners. Daspit summarizes how rap is a hybrid: "Rap is a sign with no fixed signifier, noise with no one message, and a commodity with no targeted audience based on income, race, gender, class, or ethnicity. It is an amalgam defined by and defining of these forces" (p. xxix).

Rap is a popular culture form that offers complicated layered meanings, and Daspit discusses two issues that rappers often address in contradictory ways: capitalism and misogyny. The representations of material excess in gangsta rap are often easily dismissed as problematic, but they must be considered against a historical backdrop of black women and men being denied ownership of property. It is necessary to unpack the representations of material wealth in all raps. Citing Michael Eric Dyson (1996), Daspit explains that gangsta rap "illustrates the tension between negotiation with and co-option by capitalism" (p. 172).

Rap has also been criticized for its misogyny, but Daspit is careful to point out that all rap music is not misogynistic. He names several woman rappers including Queen Latifah, Monie Love, Salt-n-Pepa, and MC Lyte who contest a male-dominated conversation in rap. The public dialogue that black women and men have in the discourse of rap (and in real life) is complicated. They are never in complete opposition to one another. Daspit includes two interesting excerpts from "Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance" by black female critic Eisa Davis (1995) that illustrates

this complex relationship. In the first excerpt, Davis addresses the tensions experienced by black women who label themselves feminist yet still enjoy raps with misogynist lyrics. Davis defends her choice to buy Snoop Dogg's Doggystyle, replete with misogynistic lyrics, rather than Queen Latifah's Black Reign with her last $15. She explains her struggle as a hip hop feminist:

> …I don't fit into a puritanical, dualistic feminism that recognizes only indignant innocence (buying Black Reign) or unenlightened guilt (buying into Doggystyle). I don't have to choose…the actual dilemma I was experiencing was how to explain that I don't feel oppressed by Snoop or defined by his conception of women—without denying that in Snoop's world, he is defining me and all women…There are no excuses for lyrical sexism….Yet I still feel virtually untouched by this verbal and visual violence toward women, and I believe this feeling springs from an increased sense of freedom rather than from apathetic resignation. (Davis quoted in Daspit, pp. 131-133)

Davis' comments reveal how the complicatedness of rap's misogyny enabled her to reach deeper self-understanding. She had to ask herself hard questions about the music she loved, and as a result of the process, learned more about who she is and what she believes. In the second excerpt, Davis places the issue of misogyny in rap within a larger American social context. She says:

> Male hip-hop artists recognize that they are hunted; they flesh out all of white America's fears by carrying out, lyrically, unthinkable acts of sociopathic destruction. The fantastical crime setting of gangsta and horrorcore rap, starring protagonists who drip with testosterone, features a masculinity that defines itself by an ability to annihilate any challenger, female or male. When this protagonist commits sexual and violent crimes, he satisfies a specifically black male yet generic desire for total power….Misogyny here becomes a reactionary act with a subversive gloss. (Davis quoted in Daspit, p. 134)

The ability of rap to conjure the questions Davis raises about the possible reasons for the misogyny expressed by some male rappers in their lyrics indicates the extent to which rap

is a complex popular culture medium that offers texts with layered meanings. Never simplistic, rap stirs lively debate.

Daspit defines a rap aesthetic as hybrid, dynamic, and contradictory, and in the final section of the chapter, he discusses how rap conceptualized in this way can transform the way we do things in classrooms. Daspit begins this section with comments from one of his former high school students about his love for rap, especially gangsta rap, to show how students can relate to its language and its messages. Students are often experts on rap's authors/performers, form, content, and themes. Following bell hooks (1994), Daspit believes rap is part of students' "'everyday conversation,' which is essential for theories that can 'educate the public' " (p. 176). Daspit goes on to apply his definition of rap's aesthetics to educational discourse. Having already defined rap as hybrid, dynamic, and contradictory, Daspit asserts that the most transformative possibility of rap is "the model it offers as a mixing, sampling, recombinant text" (p. 176). He explains the model by quoting a rap DJ (disc jockey), Paul Miller, who describes the role of DJ as a "recombiner" (p. 176). He refers to the music that the DJ puts together as "a post symbolic mood sculpture, or the mix; a disembodied and transient text" (p. 176). According to Miller, the significance of constructing music in this way is that the process of mixing and sampling "critiques intellectual property and copyright law," "reifies a communal art value structure," and "anthropomorphizes communications technology" (p. 176). Daspit discusses the pedagogical implications of conceptualizing rap as "a mixing, sampling, recombinant text" (p. 176). He says:

> If we were to begin thinking of our classrooms as a 'mix,' as recombinant, fluid entities where the 'copyrighting' privilege of authority in the guise of 'teacher' is challenged, where the entire process of learning becomes more communal, and

> where technology and popular culture become 'human' forces, we can see how hip hop aesthetics is transformative pedagogically. (p. 176)

Daspit admits that his initial attempts to include rap in his own high school classroom were mostly unsuccessful because he chose the music that suited his tastes rather than allowed his students to choose. He chose music about which he was an expert. Not until he allowed his students to help choose the music did interaction in the classroom change. Students became more engaged and thoughtful; they had lively exchanges about sexism and violence in gangsta rap, and they were able to make connections between raps by Rage Against the Machine and poems by Henry David Thoreau. Daspit's classroom became a communal learning space in which the boundary between students and teacher was blurred. The focus was on the process of learning, rather than on knowledge as an end product, a series of unchanging facts selected by the teacher that are later regurgitated by students on a test. For Daspit, rap became both "text and pedagogy—a way of organizing, or better yet a way of understanding how the transient nature of the classroom might emerge as recombinant teaching and learning" (p. 177).

Understanding rap in this way is not a quick fix, easy answer, or panacea for troubled schooling spaces. Rap is a contradictory discourse that sometimes offers problematic representations, representations that are not easy for teachers and students to unpack. Even with these representations, I still believe, along with Daspit, that there is "revolutionary power in rap, and in allowing its aesthetics to reorient our ways of being in the classroom and the world" (p. 177). I believe in the revolutionary power of rap because it has helped me to rethink how I define myself.

KRS-ONE Going Against the Grain: A Critical Study of Rap Music As A Postmodern Text

Like Daspit, Parmar (2002), in her recently completed dissertation entitled KRS-One Going Against the Grain: A Critical Study of Rap Music As A Postmodern Text, maintains that rap has transformative potential in schooling spaces. The subject of Parmar's study is the body of songs by black male rapper KRS-One, and the overall purpose of the study is to explore rap music as a postmodern text. Parmar makes two important claims. First, she maintains that the postmodern text of rap can be "an integral part of a critical media literacy and cultural curriculum" (pp. 5-6) necessary for an empowering education for all students regardless of race, culture, and class. In short, Parmar says that raps are not only educational but also potentially empowering. Second, Parmar asserts that rap, when examined as liberatory pedagogy, calls into question dominant notions of power, race, and identity from an urban black working-class youth perspective. She says that raps by KRS-One in particular "attempt to deconstruct the power institutions (media, government, police, and educational institutions) that help maintain and perpetuate mainstream ideologies" (p. 7). Even though Parmar's study differs from mine in its postmodernist theoretical framework and in its lack of significant attention to gender, it lays important groundwork for my own study of women rappers' lyrics. It warrants review because of its similar subject matter, related themes, cultural studies approach, and textual analysis methodology. I will begin a review of Parmar's dissertation by discussing each of these similarities briefly, and then I will describe the purpose for each of Parmar's five chapters more specifically.

Like Parmar, I choose a body of songs by rap performers as my subject of study. Our respective studies consider raps to be pedagogical in and of themselves. For me, the pedagogical worth of raps does not lie in how well they are able to fit inside an existing traditional curriculum, for example, in a literature class as objects of study alongside canonic texts. This kind of thinking promotes school study of only those texts that offer "positive" messages to young students. I maintain that all raps through their representations teach us about the complicated realities of young urban black life. They need not be contained inside a classroom or on a district-mandated reading list to be valuable pedagogically. Rap is a powerful language on its own and a necessary part of the at-large public curriculum, and when rap is conceived in this way, rappers become public pedagogues.

In addition to related subject matter, Parmar's study develops similar themes. She says that the general theme of her study is empowerment. Her goal as an educator and researcher is to help to create and promote an "empowering critical education" that includes "multiple critical literacies" so as to transform the role of students "from one of passivity and silence to one that is active, empowering, and liberating" (p. 5). Parmar explains the benefits of such a curriculum:

> Educators who incorporate critical literacies, such as critical media literacy, using rap music as one example, legitimate and validate the students' culture, voice, knowledge, experiences, and histories as well as aid in the healthy construction of their own racial and cultural identities. Furthermore, students learn to critically examine issues such as race, class, culture, ethnicity, and identity instead of passively allowing traditional mainstream ideologies (i.e., the hidden curriculum and cultural hegemony) to unconsciously shape their values. (p. iv)

While my focus is not on rap as part of a critical media literacy necessary for an empowering education, I do critique raps in an effort to expose those moments in which

women rappers offer messages with which black women listeners can identify. In so doing, I hope that my study becomes beneficial for other black women teachers/students. My intent, however, is not to analyze women rappers' lyrics according to an empowering vs. non-empowering dichotomy. My contention is that once representations in women's raps are deconstructed for the critiques they offer about power relations from a young black woman's perspective, they are all pedagogical.

In addition to the theme of empowerment, Parmar develops the issues of power, race, class, and social justice in her analysis of KRS-One's rap lyrics. Parmar says that these are the overall themes that emerged during the data analysis phase of her study, and she organizes the discussion of these themes as they relate to four institutions of power in the U.S. that KRS-One critiques in his raps: the media, government, police, and education. I discuss similar themes dealing with power relations in my study of women rappers' lyrics, but I talk about the intersectionality of and sometimes contradictions in women rappers' representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Parmar does not address KRS-One's representations of gender in any significant way in her analysis of his lyrics. I conclude from my own perusal of the lyrics included in Parmar's study that there are moments in KRS-One's raps in which questions about his representations of black masculinity could be raised. It seems to me that her cultural studies framework, which she describes as an "inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach often associated with the study of popular culture" (p. 12), calls for some analysis of gender-related issues.

I use black feminist theory as the primary foundation for my readings of women rappers' lyrics, and Parmar utilizes cultural studies and critical theory for her theoretical

framework. While we do not share frameworks, the methodology she describes for the collection and analysis of lyrics is similar. Parmar names her three-part methodology a bricolage, which she explains as "borrowing different methodologies from various disciplines" so as to "make meaning of complex, multi-layered texts" (p. 95). Parmar says that she uses three "analytical schemes," in her process of collecting and analyzing lyrics (the "data"), and these are textual analysis, rhetorical criticism, and critical hermeneutics (p. 96). My study also depends on textual analysis to deconstruct the meanings of women rappers' lyrics, and like Parmar, I make known my own lived experiences as they relate to my readings/interpretations of women rappers' texts.

Parmar begins her dissertation the way I do: autobiographically. At the beginning of the first chapter, she lets the reader know how she came to her research topic by providing some relevant background experiences in schools which sparked her interest in rap. Parmar describes herself as an unusually tall East Indian American female in a predominantly white rural town and school who faced constant teasing. Parmar attributes her peers' disturbing behavior to her teachers' failure to address issues of difference in school. Parmar says that music was her coping mechanism against the mistreatment. Later at her predominantly white university, she felt most "embraced" (p. 7) by black students who introduced her to rap music. Parmar says rap "provided [her] with the strength to confront issues of identity, race, and, eventually, the ability to voice [her] inner feelings" (p. 1). In graduate school after several cultural studies courses, Parmar recognized that as an educator she could "use rap music, including the enjoyment and pleasure [she] felt from listening to it, as an educational tool to empower others" (p. 9).

Parmar continues the introductory chapter by defining terms and theories that are relevant to her study. She begins by explaining critical theory and critical pedagogy as they relate to the larger field of cultural studies. Next, Parmar gives a brief overview of modernism, postmodernism, and postformalism because she says that the overview is necessary for understanding critical theory. Parmar concludes the chapter by defining the terms of an empowering transformative curriculum. Of particular relevance to my study is Parmar's discussion of cultural studies and the connection she makes between empowering pedagogy and rap.

Parmar defines cultural studies as "an inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and counter-disciplinary approach often associated with the study of popular culture" (p. 12). Theorists in cultural studies have focused their attention on the study of (popular) texts by marginalized peoples so as to challenge the privileging of the Eurocentric (high culture) canon. Cultural studies theorists value texts that have historically been neglected in academic discourses, those considered not worth intellectual examination. Rap is one such text. Parmar explains how a cultural studies approach works:

> Cultural studies analyzes the relationships among culture, knowledge, and power, from historical, social, and theoretical contexts, and is concerned with how knowledge, texts, and representations are produced and appropriated in relation to power structures....Cultural studies is negotiable, transformative, and empowering, as well as political. Thus, it can be seen as a form of social and cultural critique and a medium of social transformation. (pp. 12-13)

While I do not believe that cultural studies is a "medium of social transformation," I do believe it can serve as an important framework for teachers and students who deconstruct representations, especially in popular culture texts. A cultural studies framework allows teachers and students to generate multiple meanings for texts and understand texts as they

relate to their historical, social, and political contexts. Thus, a text no longer has only one meaning, the one printed in the Teacher's Guide, and students are no longer passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge. Teachers and students become active participants in the learning process, and both are equally important in the construction of knowledge.

Parmar also discusses the importance of studying rap using a cultural studies approach to students of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds. Students become more interested in the classroom because they are studying rap texts that are familiar to them, and their sharing of their lived experiences becomes necessary in making meaning of the messages in raps. Parmar explains the effects of bringing the study of rap to the classroom:

> For the students whose only exposure to Black urban life is through mass media representations, rap music can be a tool to help dispel stereotypes and false perceptions of Black culture, hence helping students understand the struggles of everyday life for working-class Blacks….For students who actually live the experiences described in rap lyrics, the examination of rap in itself is an empowering, meaningful, and legitimizing form of pedagogy. (p. 14)

While I agree with Parmar that rap can be a powerful tool in the classroom, I do not believe that it always dispels stereotypes and false perceptions of black life. Sometimes rap reproduces negative stereotypes, and sometimes rap exposes and resists these same stereotypes. Unlike Parmar, I do not conceptualize rap in my study as a curricular resource to be utilized by teachers, perhaps as scaffolding for the study of something else. I maintain that all raps are pedagogical and theoretical. They have much to teach us about the ways young black men and women represent urban black life and offer critiques against racism, sexism, and classism.

Parmar makes a connection between rap and an empowering education that I try to avoid. Defining empowerment as a process of appropriating power, coming to understand how systems of domination operate, and then working to transform oppressive conditions, Parmar concludes that rap can be part of the process toward empowering students. She presents several reasons for her conclusion:

> Rap…can be a liberating and empowering pedagogy, in that such a text goes against the grain of a hegemonic, national discourse. Rap can be empowering for many students because it exposes how power relations affect oppressed groups in all realms of society. Rap, when used as a critical pedagogy, can help students increase self-consciousness, question hegemonic practices, and seek action towards social change, social justice, and social equality. (p. 31)

In the second chapter, Parmar gives a historical overview of hip hop culture, outlines the history of KRS-One's career, and explains why she chose his raps in particular for her study. I also provide similar historical context for women's participation in hip hop culture and biographical information for each woman rapper whose lyrics are examined in my study. All parts of Parmar's second chapter are important, but the one that I consider most interesting for my own work is the section entitled "The Pedagogy of an Urban Griot: KRS-One." In this section, Parmar discusses KRS-One's role as teacher, instructor, and philosopher by providing samples of lyrics in which KRS-One calls himself "teacher" and his raps "edutainment." Alongside the name "teacher," KRS-One also labels himself a "black revolutionary," "rap missionary," and "total renegade" whose purpose is to "bring out the truth in a song" (pp. 90-91). Parmar connects KRS-One's self-proclaimed "teacher" status with Freire's "cultural worker," Gramsci's "organic intellectual," and Giroux's "public intellectual" (p. 86). The rapper KRS-One is no ordinary teacher in the public realm; his raps are part of a public

curriculum aimed at empowering youth to "wake up" to injustice against black people and "shake up" the systems responsible for it (p. 90). His raps have important pedagogical meanings. Parmar quotes Sister Souljah, a woman rapper, who comments on the pedagogical value of rappers:

> Hip hop is a blessing because the [Poor] Righteous Teachers, Brand Nubian, and KRS-One have actually been the educational system for Black kids, in place of the so-called educational system that is entirely financed by the American government. And in the absence of the voice of young people in hip hop, we would have even more chaos than we have today. (p. 88)

Parmar does not elaborate on the characteristics of KRS-One's pedagogy, but she does mention that he utilizes "a language that is comprehensible and relational to the poor working-class, particularly Black male urban youth" (p. 92) and that a central theme in his raps is to "unveil the 'unofficial truths' about the social, political and cultural conditions in urban communities" (p. 89). KRS-ONE does all of this through autobiographical sketches that bring to life his messages, which are mostly his critiques of four power structures: the media, the police, the government, and the educational system. Parmar organizes her analysis of KRS-One's lyrics in a later chapter around these four categories.

Parmar's third chapter is an explanation of the methodology for the study. Parmar describes her methodology as a bricolage because she uses three qualitative research analytical schemes for the collection and analysis of rap lyrics (or the data). The analytical schemes Parmar chooses are textual analysis, rhetorical criticism, and critical hermeneutics. Her ultimate goal in using a bricolage of interpretive methodologies is to "empower youth themselves to critically analyze forms of popular culture" and help them to "make sense of their own lives" and "understand the conditions under which others

live" (p. 111). Parmar's rationale for using several methodologies, instead of one, is that rap lyrics are often complex and contradictory with multiple meanings. It becomes necessary to employ a variety of methodological techniques to uncover and make sense of the contradictions in rap texts so as to achieve a more thorough and thoughtful analysis. Utilizing a variety of methodological tools is also necessary because research for Parmar is an "interactive process shaped by [the researcher's] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity" (p. 95). Parmar explains the effects of conceptualizing research as an interactive process:

> The result of this kind of research is a rigorous, complex montage of interconnected images, interpretations, insights, and representations of the relationships between popular cultural texts—or rap lyrics as used in this research study—and the social conditions that produce them. (p. 95)

Parmar understands that her own subjectivities and lived experiences are not removed from her collection and analysis of lyrics but directly shape both processes. Like Parmar, I recognize how my own lived experiences shape my study. I also make known how my history relates to my readings/interpretations of women rappers' texts.

I am interested in what Parmar has to say about textual analysis because I also complete a textual analysis of women rappers' lyrics. Parmar describes textual analysis as message-centered. The focus of the analysis is on making meaning(s) of the text according to relevant historical, cultural, social, political, and theoretical frameworks. The focus is not on only superficial, literal meanings of the text, but on deeper understanding of the text in relation to a larger context(s) and the implications of that understanding on the person analyzing the text. Parmar explains:

> The use of textual analysis allows the bricoleur to view culture as a narrative or story-telling process in which particular texts or "cultural artifacts," such as rap

> lyrics, consciously or unconsciously link themselves to larger stories at play in society. The main focus is on how texts create subject positions (identities) for those who use them. (p. 97)

My purpose as researcher completing a textual analysis is to make meaning(s) of women rappers' lyrics using relevant frameworks—among them black feminist theory—as well as reveal how my story is woven into my analysis. My textual analysis of women rappers' lyrics is a beginning to understanding how the representations of young black women performers and black feminist theory connect and comment on issues relevant to black women's daily lives including my own. Ultimately, I hope that my analysis will help other young black women to learn how to make sense of the tensions in their lives as they unlayer the meanings in rap texts.

Parmar's fourth chapter is an analysis of lyrics in 23 of KRS-One's raps using a three-part bricolage. The themes which emerged through the process of analyzing include power, race, class, social justice, and empowerment (p. 114), and Parmar organizes these themes as they relate to four major categories of power institutions that KRS-One critiques. Media, government, police, and education—these are the institutions that KRS-One faults most often in his raps about the injustices against black folks in the U.S. Parmar's analysis is insightful and provocative, and her claims are well supported by KRS-One's lyrics. She is successful in showing how "KRS-One's rap is a critical, liberating pedagogy that invites listeners to further explore the social, historic, economic, and political constructs of racism, discrimination, violence, and disempowerment" (p. 150).

Parmar's analysis is different from mine in two ways. First, Parmar does not address issues of gender in her analysis of KRS-One's raps, which seems necessary given

her cultural studies framework and overall purpose to create an empowering and critical education. She makes one remark about gender, and it comes in the very last sentence of the analysis chapter. She mentions that KRS-One's raps leave out young urban black women's experiences and focus only on young urban black men's experiences. While this is an important omission to point out, Parmar never problematizes the exclusion nor contextualizes it within the larger male-dominated rap industry. She also does not examine how KRS-One constructs representations of black masculinity. As I read through the lyrics Parmar includes in the analysis chapter, I found examples that prompted questions about KRS-One's representations of gender. I noticed that KRS-One uses 1970s Black Nationalist imagery to convey strength; for example, he mentions revolution, rebellion, the Black Panthers, and Malcolm X's oft-repeated phrase "by any means necessary" in a few songs. These images, which could be read in gendered terms, deserve attention in Parmar's analysis. Important questions to consider in relation to KRS-One's raps are how are his critiques (if at all) intertwined with heterosexist, patriarchal representations of black masculinity, and what implications (if any) do these representations have on KRS-One's pedagogy of empowerment?

The other difference is that Parmar seems caught up in analyzing, perhaps judging, KRS-One's raps using a positive vs. negative dichotomy. The focus is on those raps that Parmar deems "positive pedagogy." To illustrate Parmar's emphasis of the positive, I include the following statement she makes to summarize several of KRS-One raps:

> KRS-One's message exemplifies the positive, empowering side of rap music that many may not realize, acknowledge, or accept. His various definitions of rap, as

> shown in the songs above, describe a positive and emancipatory cultural pedagogy that many can learn from. (p. 121)

I wonder about KRS-One's raps that are not "positive." What makes a rap "positive" anyway? Can only raps that are "positive" be empowering? Parmar defines what she means by "empowerment" in the first chapter, and using that definition, KRS-One's lyrics are clearly empowering. But it is Parmar's seemingly *a priori* connection between empowerment and positiveness that must be questioned.

I am familiar with Parmar's privileging of the positive in KRS-One's raps. Early in my research process, I examined women rappers' lyrics and chose to write about those that I considered "positive" or "uplifting." These were the only ones that I labeled "pedagogical." I excluded all others because I did not want my writing used as support for the unfair charges leveled against rap, namely that it perpetuates negative stereotypes associated with black life. Initially, I intended to show the "other" side of rap, the songs that could be used in classrooms as pedagogical tools. Using this approach, my writing could not account for a large number of songs that resisted positive-negative categorization. I realized that judging songs along this either/or dichotomy did not produce a thoughtful and thorough analysis that showed how all rap texts are public pedagogy. Now I try to unlayer and problematize the contradictions in women rappers' lyrics rather than pass judgment on them.

Parmar's last chapter presents the findings of her study. She focuses on the benefits of integrating the critical media literacy of rap into an existing curriculum. She proposes that such integration produces a cultural curriculum, an "inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary, and counter-disciplinary" (p. 157) curriculum much more suited for an

provocative environment for both students and teachers. Parmar explains the overall effects of a cultural curriculum:

> The addition of subjugated knowledge, as well as the inclusion of students' voices, histories, and experiences, opens the door for a transformative pedagogy that places race, class, and gender, as well as relevant social, cultural, political, and economic issues at the forefront of the curriculum. (p. 157)

After she defines a cultural curriculum and outlines its benefits, Parmar offers practical pedagogical suggestions for integrating a particular KRS-One rap entitled "The Racist" into a high school classroom. Parmar interprets the song's layered meanings so as to show educators how to examine popular culture representations for what they say about race, class, culture, gender, and ethnicity. Her suggestions for classroom practice are evidence of the overall goal she outlines at the beginning of the dissertation: to provide an empowering education for all. Parmar ends the chapter on a hopeful note. She believes that even though a transformative cultural curriculum may be slow to evolve, it is possible. She admits to being changed because of the process of her research. Parmar's study illustrates how rap is powerful pedagogy.

Conclusion

Sound Identities, Popular Culture and Critical Pedagogy, and KRS-ONE Going Against the Grain all lay theoretical foundation in curriculum studies for my study of women rappers' texts. Even though these three works are different from my study, especially in their theoretical grounding in postmodernism and their lack of significant attention to the intersections of race and gender, they do focus on issues with which I am also concerned in my analysis of women rappers' texts: 1) They challenge educators to recognize the knowledge rappers share in their songs as a legitimate form of knowledge

worthy of study in schooling spaces; 2) they examine rap texts without romanticizing them by pointing to the contradictory messages in them which sometimes reinforce misogyny, homophobia, and material excess; and 3) they conceptualize rap music as a site for transformative pedagogy. I hope my study enables educators to understand the critiques black women rappers offer to their audiences about young black women's experiences, deconstruct black women rappers' representations of black women's identities, expose the contradictions in women rappers' texts, and value black women rappers' texts as pedagogical.

CHAPTER THREE
REPRESENTIN' FOR THE LADIES: AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN RAP

Introduction

The history of women's participation in rap is complicated. Cultural critics, music historians, and the rap industry in general have all dismissed the significance of women to the rap music tradition. Because men have defined the images and norms of rap—what is rap, who can rap, what rap is of the most worth—women rappers have been consistently stereotyped as subordinate to men in their abilities to write and perform raps. Since the beginnings of rap, women rappers have experienced difficulties participating in the industry on their own terms, but over the years, women have carved out spaces from which to tell their own stories with which black women audiences can identify. These stories ultimately work against male supremacy in the rap industry.

In this chapter, I review three important works detailing the complicated history of women's participation in rap. Nancy Guevara and Cheryl Keyes discuss the multiple ways in which women have constructed their identities and gained more control over their images in the discourse of rap in "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin'" (1996), "'We're More than a Novelty, Boys': Strategies of Female Rappers in the Rap Music Tradition" (1993), and "Daughters of the Blues: Women, Race, and Class Representation in Rap Music Performance" (2002). My review of these works reveals that women rappers' representational choices have moved through three stages. In the earliest days of hip hop, women rappers mostly defined themselves in relation or opposition to male rappers. These early women performers utilized feminine styles to distinguish themselves from male performers. For example, women graffiti artists preferred softer

colors—mostly pastels—to the dark colors that men often chose, and women rappers dressed in high heels and mini skirts to separate themselves from male rappers. Later, women rappers defined themselves by inverting and/or appropriating male performance behaviors. Resisting (hetero)sex symbol personas, women rappers became "hard" like their male peers to avoid being labeled weak and to gain credibility as legitimate emcees. Most recently, women rappers have chosen self-definition. The following review shows women rappers' different strategies of representation to gain legitimacy in the industry and their movement away from male-identified images to those like the Fly Girl, the Queen, and the Lesbian, the figure least defined in relation to male culture.

Pink Flowers, High Heels, and Patriarchy

In "Women Writin' Rappin' Breakin,'" Guevara (1996) argues that even though women have played an essential creative role in the formation and development of hip hop, it remains a predominantly male-coded cultural practice (or space). In mainstream commercial representations of hip hop, women are rarely presented as producers and active subjects. Rather, they are usually depicted in secondary (lesser/minor/inferior) roles such as cheerleaders, bystanders, or sexual objects. Guevara maintains that women's marginalization, misrepresentation, and exclusion in the discourse of hip hop culture are deliberate acts by the mostly male image makers who control and manage the hip hop industry. She writes:

> The undermining, deletion, or derogatory stereotyping of women's creative role in the development of minority cultures is a routine practice that serves to impede any progressive artistic or social development by women that might threaten male hegemony in the sphere of cultural production. (p. 51)

In this passage, Guevara suggests that the sexist forces working against women in hip hop are connected to larger oppressive forces working against women in general. Owned by white men and managed by black men (i.e., especially black male producers), the hip hop industry is a male-dominated space in which women struggle to create and express women-centered styles and images. Guevara uses excerpts from interviews with black and Latina women graffiti artists, rappers, and break dancers to call into question and correct the distorted images of women in hip hop. She asks:

> Who are these women? What do they think is the origin or future of hip hop? How do women use this style? Is theirs different from the style men use? What do they think of the social role of hip hop? (p. 51)

Guevara discusses two women graffiti writers, Lady Pink and Lady Heart, who reveal why they became involved in subway graffiti writing. Pink says her participation is aimed "against the idea that women have no brains, only emotions. That at three o'clock in the morning a girl should be sleeping" (p. 52). Lady Heart adds: "It is an artistic outlet, to develop your artistic qualities and to make your own little statements" (p. 53). For both women, graffiti writing is a political act tied to their gendered identities. According to Guevara, their graffiti critiques social problems, such as "war, crime, corruption, poverty, inflation, pollution, racism, injustice" as indicative of "a man's world" (p. 53). Through their art, they connect oppression to patriarchy. Lady Pink's more overtly political illustrations include "representations of burning bodies in El Salvador, war tanks in Nicaragua, skulls after a nuclear disaster, and murals of formidable Amazons symbolizing the power of women" (p. 53).

Lady Pink and Lady Heart also insist that their choice of styles and subjects are "consciously, deliberately feminine" (p. 53). Instead of black, the color preference of

many male graffiti writers, Lady Pink and Lady Heart opt for lighter, softer colors, sometimes deciding to exclude black altogether from their paintings on NYC trains. "Women in distress or very strong women" (p. 53), along with landscape and flower scenes, figure prominently as subjects in these women's artistic expressions. Though both women acknowledge support they received from specific male writers, they allege that women writers, especially those with intentional women-centered styles, are often the particular targets of jealous male writers. Some male writers cross out women's names signifying authorship of the art, replacing them with their own. Among subway train graffiti artists, this "crossing out" is an act of disrespect. Underground battles like these predicated on jealousy, say Lady Heart and Lady Pink, have "killed" graffiti. Despite their disappointment and struggles, both women still express love and hope for the future of graffiti.

Guevara follows the section on women graffiti artists with a discussion of women rappers. Guevara begins by using the testimony of Lisa Lee, an early woman rapper, to describe the techniques of composing and performing raps. Lee comments on the collaborative style she prefers for the "writing" of rap performances. She says:

> I write my own rhymes; when we do routines, we all write them. To construct a routine we all keep bringing our different ideas. I may see something that would sound good in a rap. What nobody else has talked about. Whatever idea comes to mind, we write it down and figure out how to put it into a rap. (p. 55)

Together with her all-woman group, the Us Girls, Lee infuses her performances with multiple voices to create a woman-shared space for the purpose of "trying to involve the people," in other words, for the purpose of call-and-response with the audience. Thus the stage becomes an inclusive, communal space, rather than an exclusive showcase for a

lone (male) rap superstar. But the stage is not necessarily an emancipatory space for women rappers. Guevara says that women rappers often feel constrained in their performances; boundaries exist along gender lines. To elicit excitement from fans, men are able to take off pieces of clothing and "talk nasty" (p. 56) to women in the audience during live performances without being judged negatively. On the other hand, women rappers cannot perform in similar ways and still receive approval. Lee fears being labeled "disgusting and nasty" and instead chooses to "dress more feminine" because she says "miniskirts and high-heeled shoes guarantee a favorable response" (p. 56). Lee's reaction indicates that audiences, reflective of society in general, limit the forms of sexual display enacted by women. Women rappers have fewer choices in what they can say and how they can dress than their male counterparts. If their performances include open, aggressive expressions of sexuality, they risk being branded a whore and not being taken seriously as a skilled woman emcee.

Despite the obvious sexism—or perhaps in resistance to it—Lee seems to use the stage as a pedagogical site. Paying particular attention to the content of her rhymes, Lee transforms the rap stage into something more than a location for entertainment. Aware of the growing popularity of rap, Lee seizes the opportunity to reach larger audiences with songs that teach something. She says:

> Before you just wanted to get the crowd to party. Now you go home and you write something that makes sense. Whenever you rap, you want to relate a message to the people. Because people are more into it now, you know that they really listen to what you're saying. (p. 55)

Sometimes these songs teach lessons that are constructed as direct responses to specific black male rappers' sexism. According to Guevara, "this active controversing

and cross-reference creates dialogue aimed at complementing or, more often, challenging the statements made by [male] rappers" (p. 57). For Shanté, another woman rapper Guevara features, rap responses are essential to "put guys, or anybody else with a crazy ego, in their place" (p. 57). Through their songs, women rappers are able to create a public discourse of resistance to male rappers' demeaning (mis)representations of black women and in so doing, a public discourse of resistance to male supremacy in general.

The third group of women in hip hop on which Guevara focuses is women breakdancers; she presents excerpts from interviews with Daisy Castro, also known as Baby Love, a well-known woman breakdancer in the all-male breakdancing group, the Rock Steady Crew. Guevara begins with a discussion of the incorrect assumptions that the public has about women and breakdancing: 1) Women are less likely to try breakdancing because women lack the necessary upper-body strength to handle the athletic moves of breaking; 2) breakdancing is too dangerous for women; and 3) breakdancing requires aggressive behavior because it developed exclusively as competition between men.

To dispel these myths, Guevara points out that breakdancing has more to do with "concentration, balance, practice, and precision than with sheer physical strength" and that a possible influence for breakdancing is the "speedy footwork and acrobatic tricks of freestyle double-Dutch" (p. 58), a highly stylized form of jump-roping with two ropes at the same time. It is practiced mostly by groups of young black girls and depends on how well the jumper "balances her body weight, the swiftness of leg and feet movements, and the gracefulness of her performance" (p. 58). Baby Love says that women breakdancers like some moves better than others, but she maintains that women breakdancers are

skilled and strong enough to do all of the breaking moves. She describes a distinct b-girl breakdancing style that is an eclectic mix of moves:

> Girls got all kinds of styles. They got b-boy style, then they mix it with b-girl style or with lock. B-girl style is more feminine. It's basically the same, just different names. The guys do it more of a man style, a girl maybe can do a little bit of turning or a little bit of jazz, and then right there you could start breaking. That would be a feminine way. (p. 58)

Guevara describes women breakdancers' "feminine style" as generally consisting of breaking moves that are "slower and smoother," and she proposes that this conventional femininity plays a contradictory dual role in breakdancing (p. 58). First, it restricts women breakdancers' style and form of expression. Second, women breakdancers stress a feminine style to "differentiate it, and to some extent, distance it from the style of [men]" (p. 59). Innovative and improvisational, this "feminine style" is a kind of resistance against the policing of women's bodies and the patronizing that women breakdancers often face from men who try to dictate which steps are safe and suitable for women to do. Similar to rapping and graffiti writing, women breakers' style, even if contradictory, is an act of gendered self-assertion in a male-centered and controlled space.

Guevara concludes by suggesting that despite the media's portrayal of women as insignificant to the creation and continuance of hip hop, they are actively involved in all forms of hip hop practice. They do not occupy space only as "cheerleaders, bystanders, and exotic outsiders" (p. 61), but as creative artists trying to define hip hop in women's terms. Women graffiti writers, rappers, and breakdancers develop styles that are often different from those of their male counterparts. These women-centered styles call into question traditional notions of what it means to be a rapper, graffiti artist, and

breakdancer, but their choice of styles sometimes takes on contradictory forms. Some of the specific styles mentioned by each of the three groups of women, such as the painting of big red lips on subway trains as a statement of women's autonomy, the wearing of miniskirts and high heels by women rappers to obtain a favorable response from the audience during a performance, and the search for slower and smoother breakdancing moves, seem to indicate that these women have retained stereotypical notions of "female delicacy and the ideal of feminine purity" (p. 61).

While not unproblematic in their expression, the styles created by these hip hop women represent challenges to male supremacy. Guevara asserts that they represent "important acts of resistance when considered within the gender structure of hip hop practice" (p. 61). The testimony of the women Guevara presents helps to clarify women's complex positioning in the space of hip hop. She concludes:

> The young women's dual struggle, both with the media images and within hip hop itself, represents the movement's most radical challenge: Just as hip hop poses a menace to dominant white bourgeois culture, women's participation in its supposedly masculine rituals threatens still another haven of male hegemony. (p. 61)

Come(In) Hard

Like Guevara, Cheryl Keyes (1993) documents the various strategies of representation women rappers choose for themselves. In " 'We're More than a Novelty, Boys': Strategies of Female Rappers in the Rap Music Tradition," Keyes makes the general argument that women rappers appropriate male rappers' modes of performance behavior to gain equal access and attention in the rap music industry. Keyes maintains that women rappers must sometimes assume performance behaviors typically associated with male rappers because taking on a male aesthetic of performance helps them to gain

public space and an audience for the expression of daily realities from a black woman's point of view. Women rappers "use performance as a vehicle to express their responses to stereotypes and male standards, while simultaneously achieving recognition and success in the male-dominated tradition" (p. 204).

Before Keyes outlines the specific male performance behaviors that women rappers appropriate, she presents a brief history of rap music. She locates the origins of rap in Africa. She explains:

> The roots of rap music can be traced all the way from the African epic bardic tradition to rural southern-based expressions of African Americans—toasts, folktales, sermons, blues, children's game songs—all of which are recited in a chanted rhyme or poetic fashion. Except for the sermon, these expressions are mainly performed in secular settings, from the front porch to the local juke joint. (p. 204)

Keyes continues her tracing of rap's origins with a discussion of the first Great Migration. She explains that when black Southerners migrated to northern cities in the 1920s and 1950s, they took with them their black language traditions. The context for their performance and transformation in Northern cities was the streets, which Keyes explains as the term African Americans use to refer to gathering places like "concrete ball courts and street corner taverns, places remote from the family home and religious centers" (p. 204). Keyes says "the street context fostered a new way of speaking known as 'rappin' (formerly called 'jive talk'), characterized by its personalized style and urban-derived street vocabulary" (p. 204).

Not confined to the streets, rapping made its way into the performances of black jazz musicians in the 1930s, black radio disc jockeys and black comedians in the 1940s and 1950s, and various black nationalists by the mid-1960s. Rapping then emerged as

two different song styles in black music of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Keyes describes the love rap as "a monologue celebrating the feats and woes of love" (p. 205), and she says the form was made famous by Isaac Hayes, Barry White, and Millie Jackson. Keyes defines the funk style, the other rapping form, as "monologues on topics about partying" (p. 205) and mentions George Clinton and his band Parliament as artists who popularized this form. Maintaining a steady increase in popularity, the style of rapping evolved into the musical genre of rap by the early 1970s. Since then, rap, "a composite of the aforementioned expressive forms [toasts, folktales, blues, etc.] in which rhyme and street talk are recited in rhythm over an instrumental sound track" (p. 205), has increasingly become a social phenomenon influencing all of American popular culture.

Next, Keyes traces the history of women's participation in the early years of rap. Keyes credits comedienne Jackie "Moms" Mabley and blues ballad singer Millie Jackson as early influences on contemporary women rappers. Of the two women, Keyes chooses to focus on the rapping style of Millie Jackson, who she says inserted rapping monologues into many of her songs, especially extemporaneously in her live performances. Keyes includes an excerpt of one of Jackson's rapping monologues as an example of her style and content. These monologues were most often about the do's and don'ts of love from both women's and men's viewpoints. Sparky Dee and Roxanne Shanté, two women rappers who were contemporaries of Millie Jackson, acknowledge that they learned to rap from listening to Millie Jackson's records.

In addition to Roxanne Shanté and Sparky Dee, Keyes mentions that other women rappers played a significant role in rap's history and development. Though male rappers recorded the first rap song, women rappers formed their own groups, and they were

popular in their local communities. Ms. Melodie explains women's participation in the beginnings of rap:

> Females were always into rap, had their little crews [the Mercedes Ladies, for example] and were known for rocking parties, schoolyards, whatever it was; and females rocked just as hard as males [but] the male was just first to be put on wax [record]. (p. 206)

When record companies recognized the increasing moneymaking potential of rap, more and more rappers, including women, secured record deals.

The first woman to record a solo rap song was Lady B in 1980, and a year later, Sugar Hill Records recorded a rap song by an all-woman group named Sequence. One of their most popular songs entitled "Simon Says" is regarded by Keyes as one of the earliest women's commercial rap recordings with a feminist tone. In this song, Sequence cautions men who are irresponsible and promiscuous to become more responsible for the children they help to create. Though several women rappers, namely Sha Rock of The Funky Four Plus One, Shelia Spencer, Lisa Lee, and Sula, were successful during the early stages of rap, the recording careers of these women were brief in comparison to many of their male counterparts. Keyes mentions several possible reasons for the quick end to these women's rap careers: lack of credibility as serious emcees because of their "sexy, glamorous, and somewhat frivolous image," no follow-up singles to their popular first recordings, too much competition, and marriage and maternal responsibilities (p. 207). Since these early women in rap, women have returned to the rap game in larger numbers and have remained there. Interestingly, Roxanne Shanté says that her family responsibilities have caused her to continue her career:

> It [family life] makes your job; it makes you strive that much harder, to know that you have to succeed so they [male rappers] won't say, 'See, I told you she was just a girl, she got pregnant, she had a baby and it's over.' (p. 207)

Shanté reconceptualizes her role as mother. Instead of motherhood getting in the way of work, it actually serves to energize her role as rapper/performer.

Next is Keyes' discussion of women rappers' appropriation of male rappers' performance behaviors in the mid-1980s. Keyes maintains that to attain credibility as skilled emcees and to achieve longevity in the business, these women rappers often utilized the performance behaviors typically linked with male rappers to their advantage. Unlike their predecessors, women rappers of the mid-1980s chose appropriation as a strategy of resistance against negative stereotypes. They deliberately chose to appropriate dress style, vocal timbre, and stylized speech behavior associated with male rappers to avoid categorization as "sex symbols, novelties, or performers without longevity" (p. 208). They also did not want to be regarded as weak. Some women rappers of the 1980s preferred the label "woman" to "lady" because the latter implied softness, fragility, and weakness, the image they say caused the speedy end to many of their foresisters' careers. Keyes quotes Sparky Dee: "You have to come hard [aggressive]…. If you come soft, you get booed off the stage, and you can't smile [because smiling indicates vulnerability]" (p. 208). Roxanne Shanté connects the soft image with a woman rapper's performance attire, "If I was to get up there in a pair of shoes and a dress, I'd be over" (p. 208). Keyes is clear that women rappers during this time did not wish to be male or copy male performance behaviors exactly; women altered the styles just enough so that they worked for them.

Hip hop performance wear for men in the 1980s included black leather jackets and pants, thick gold necklaces, and designer sweat suits and sneakers. Instead of high-heeled shoes and mini-skirts, women rappers chose clothes and accessories similar to their male counterparts, but women feminized the gear, making sure their clothes were tailored and designed specifically for them. Women also preferred big, heavy-looking gold earrings to chunky gold chains. Keyes maintains that taking on a male dress aesthetic enabled women rappers to express woman-centered messages in performance. Male-derived fashion styles ultimately helped to make possible the acceptance of some women as legitimate rappers.

To distance themselves from the lady image and improve their chances at success, women rappers also appropriated male rappers' "hardcore" street attitude and behavior in their performances. Keyes defines hardcore: "Tough and aggressive behavior conveyed through the use of expletives, heightened speech, exaggeration, and 'dissin'—the verbal act of disrespecting or downplaying someone else's attributes while praising one's self" (p. 209). Keyes says that male rappers most often engaged in a hardcore style of dissing against other men, and they usually directed their insults at specific male rival rappers' rhyming ability. The dis game was (and still is) a male-centered one; women were not (and are not) powerful enough to play. Because women rappers were deemed lesser emcees with inferior rhyming skills, male rappers did not even dis women rappers as fellow rappers. Instead male rappers "directly insult[ed] them as women by depicting them as "buffoons, nags, teases, or sluts" (p. 211). I conclude that, when leveled against women rappers, the public insults become racialized, sexualized, and gendered attacks, a contemporary, hip hop reversioning of the old stereotypes of the black woman as whore.

Keyes explains that women rappers of the 1980s answered some of these characterizations with response raps, a woman's follow-up song to the male version, thus creating a conversation among rappers. The dialogue among male and female rappers is a complicated mix of voices, and women rappers actively participate to defend their positioning as women. Their responses challenge male rappers' derogatory representations of black women, expose men's fantasies about their supposed sexual prowess, and highlight men's sexual promiscuity.

Keyes discusses how the dis in women rappers' responses were different from men's. She says that to gain equal footing, women rappers dissed other women rappers as well as male rappers in hardcore style. In contrast to male rappers' style, women rappers did not directly aim their dissing at specific male rappers. Women rappers' dissing style took on a more indirect quality. Instead of addressing a particular male opponent by name, women rappers sometimes used the all-inclusive, generalized pronoun "you" to dis, a strategy that diverted attention away from gender. The focus was on the dis itself, not so much on the target of the insult.

According to Keyes, women rappers also used signifying to dis male rappers, another indirect form of insult. Keyes defines signifying as a kind of verbal battle with "indirect intent or metaphorical reference; the meaning of the statement is allusive and often ambiguous" (p. 212). A subtle strategy of dissing, signifying was chosen by women rappers more often than sounding, the technique more commonly used by male rappers in which the insult is direct, straightforward, and clear, but less complicated. Keyes maintains that signifying requires more creativity and sophistication with words, so women rappers proved themselves in the rap music arena as highly skilled emcees or

"powerful persons of words" (p. 212) when they signified on male rappers. Keyes includes the following rap excerpt by Salt-n-Pepa as an example of the allusive manner in which women rappers signify on their male rivals. In the example, Salt-n-Pepa praise their woman disc jockey, Spinderella, and claim that she is as skillful or better than male disc jockeys. Though Salt-n-Pepa do not use the complete names of two popular male disc jockeys of the time, they use enough of their names so that the references to Jam Master Jay and Grandmaster Flash are easily recognizable to rap music fans:

> Like a fever she'll heat up
> Burn and beat up.
> If you can't put up,
> Then shut the hell up.
> For you mix masters and cut masters,
> True grand masters, even jam masters,
> Listen to what I'm saying on the mike.
> She's hard as a man. (p. 213)

Salt-n-Pepa choose to appropriate the "hard" reference used so often by male rappers to describe their skills on the microphone.

I maintain that characterizing Spinderella to be "hard as a man" works as resistance on at least two levels. It problematizes the taken-for-granted assumption that men are the only highly skilled disc jockeys, and it calls into question the very marker of heterosexual masculinity, namely "hardness." This lyrical inventiveness helps these women rappers to secure space in the rap music scene and be taken seriously as legitimate rappers. Unlike their predecessors, the focus is on rap skills, not on physical features. Many of the women rappers of the mid-to-late 1980s were thus able to achieve longer careers than the women rappers of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

To sound "hard," women rappers of the 1980s also adjusted their vocal timbre, which Keyes says, "encompasses articulation and tonal aspects, ranging from legato, velvety, and mellow to harsh, percussive, and boisterous" (p. 214). During performances, early women rappers' voices like Sequence, Sha Rock, and Lady B sounded "smooth, velvety, and mellow" in keeping with their "sexy, glamorous" image (p. 214). To differentiate themselves from the early women rappers and to distance themselves from the weak lady image, women rappers in the 1980s appropriated the vocal style of hardcore male rappers, a "harsher, raspy, boisterous, and percussive style of delivery" (p. 214). Adjusting their vocal tones to sound "hard," women rappers created an image different from the sexual stereotypes that constrained early women rappers. They sounded bolder, self-assured, and stronger, like they could hold their own on the microphone.

Keyes makes clear that women rappers also used appropriation to express their feelings about sexual relationships with men. Most frequently through inversion, or what Keyes calls a "gender-switching, macho approach to romance" (p. 214), women rappers of the 1980s created songs that showed men how it felt when the roles in heterosexual relationships were reversed. Keyes maintains that women rappers did not regularly write lyrics in which women undermine or subvert the traditional roles in heterosexual courtship. Rather, they used inversion to call attention to the sometimes oppressive nature of heterosexual relationships. The women in their songs usually took on a role similar to that of a typical domineering heterosexual man. The woman was more powerful than the man in the relationship. She was the one in control. She dominated and cheated. I conclude that even though the approach of inversion does not challenge

typical representations of the unequal power relations sometimes inherent in heterosexual relationships, it does help to challenge representations of male domination in a heterosexual relationship. Keyes includes the following example from Shocky Shay to illustrate women rappers' "gender-switching, macho approach":

> I have to rough you up and cut you up and treat you like cattle
> You should have been good, boy, we wouldn't have to battle.
> So now you just listen with your hands in a cup
> And don't say [a] word, you know my right is enough
> …['cause] You got no rights! (p. 215)

Keyes points out that women rappers of the 1980s occasionally made feminist statements about the struggles of heterosexual relationships using the "gender-switching, macho approach." MC Lyte, in her rap "Paper Thin," tells Sam, her fictitious male boyfriend, that she knows about his infidelity. She is not fooled by his insincere expressions of love:

> When you say you love me, it doesn't matter.
> It goes into my head as just chit chatter.
> You may think it's egotistical or just worry free.
> What you say I take none of it seriously
> And even if I did I wouldn't tell you so.
> I'll let you pretend to read me and then you'll know
> 'Cuz I hate when one attempts to analyze.
> Fact I despise those who even try
> To look into my eyes to see what I am thinking.
> The dream is over, your yacht is sinking. (p. 215)

MC Lyte is not humiliated, sad, or disempowered by Sam's unfaithfulness. She dismisses him as not even worth her time; he becomes an expendable commodity. Hers is a message for the empowerment of women. She raps:

> You ain't got the bait that it takes to hook this,
> Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! Sucker you missed….
> I treat all of you like I treat all of them.
> What you say to me is still paper thin. (p. 215)

Keyes concludes by suggesting that unlike early women rappers, women rappers of the 1980s were able to maintain some longevity in the business. They did so by challenging the sexual stereotypes they faced as black women through the appropriation of male rappers' performance behaviors, particularly hardcore style dissin, vocal timbre, and attire. They established a space within the tradition in which their voices were heard, asserted themselves in a male-dominated space, and worked for recognition of their rapping skills, not attention for their physical appearance. As Roxanne Shanté says, "Before we used to be treated like little sisters; now we're seen as peers" (p. 216). Eventually, contemporary women in rap were regarded as serious, legitimate rappers.

"Daughters of the Blues": Fly Girls, Queens, and Lesbians

"Daughters of the Blues: Women, Race, and Class Representation in Rap Music Performance," a chapter in Cheryl Keyes' book Rap Music and Street Consciousness (2002), picks up the story of contemporary women rappers. Keyes links contemporary women rappers to blues women performers of the 1920s. Building on the work of Angela Davis (1998) in Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, who maintains that "through the blues, black women were able to autonomously work out—as audiences and performers—a working-class model of womanhood" (p. 46), Keyes claims that women rappers are part of a continuum of black women musicians, established by early blues women singers, who publicly address issues relevant to black working-class women in their performances. Similar to women blues singers, women emcees use rap as a site from which to assert and problematize working-class ideologies of black womanhood.

Following Davis, Keyes maintains that women musicians in jazz, pop, and rhythm and blues do not create representations with which black working-class women can identify as often as women rappers and early twentieth century blues women. Like the classic blues women of the 1920s, women rappers write and perform songs about everyday life struggles, like paying the bills, managing a family, and maintaining a romantic relationship, that are especially meaningful to black working-class women. Important themes in the representations created by women performers in both generations include surviving in a system that works against those who are black and poor and female, rejecting mainstream idealizations of romantic love, and attaining financial and sexual autonomy. Together women in both black music traditions craft "a discourse that articulates a cultural and political struggle over sexual relations: a struggle that is directed against the objectification of female sexuality within a patriarchal order, but also tries to reclaim women's bodies" (Carby, 1986, quoted in Keyes, p. 187).

Keyes compares the content of songs by blues women and women rappers, and she says their songs share at least two similarities. First, prison and ghetto love songs are common to both blues and rap women performers, and in these songs, the women refer to their sexual partners using language very different from women artists in pop and jazz. Blues women "affectionately refer to their male lovers as 'Papa' or 'Daddy,' while women of rap refer to their male competitors or lovers as 'sophisticated thugs' or 'niggas'" (p. 187). Also, some blues women and women rappers construct queer representations for their audiences in mainstream songs that feature lesbian relationships or women loving women: Ma Rainey in "Prove It on Me Blues" and Queen Pen in "Girlfriend." Second, women in both traditions challenge the denigration of the full-

figured black woman, historically portrayed in the patriarchal-controlled media as the asexual mammy figure. Keyes explains: "Classic blues singers not only privileged the large-framed black woman, they embraced her as a sexually desirable and sexually active being. Such attitudes about being full-figured, fly, and seductive remain a fixture in hip hop" (p. 188). Many contemporary women rappers like Queen Latifah and most recently Missy Elliott, who are both self-proclaimed "big girls," confront standards of beauty centered on whiteness and thinness.

Keyes groups contemporary women rappers into four categories, which she says emerged after interviewing an interpretive community (Bobo, 1995) of black women performers, fans, critics, and scholars. MC Lyte provides a timeline of women in rap divided across three periods: the early 1980s, the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, and the late 1990s:

> Sha-Rock, Sequence, to me, that's the first crew. Then you've got a second crew, which is Salt-n-Pepa, Roxanne Shanté, The Real Roxanne, me, Latifah, Monie [Love], and Yo-Yo. Then after that you got Da Brat, Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, Heather B. (p. 188)

The four categories to emerge are "Queen Mother," "Fly Girl," "Sista with Attitude," and "The Lesbian" (p. 189), and though discussed separately, the categories are not meant to be fixed. Rather Keyes conceives them as open and shifting because they reflect the images and ways of being of black women in contemporary urban culture. Black women are not monolithic but complex, complicated combinations of many subjectivities. Black women rappers may belong to one or several of these categories at the same time as would any black woman.

Named for its association with traditional African court culture, the Queen Mother category includes women rappers who connect themselves with Africa in some way, sometimes through lyrical content; sometimes through dress like Kente cloth, African headdresses, and ankh-stylized jewelry; and sometimes through hairstyles like braids or naturals. Women rappers in the Queen Mother category describe themselves as "Asiatic Black Women," "Nubian Queens," "intelligent black women," or "sistas droppin' knowledge to the people" (p. 189), labels indicative of their self-constructed identities and their intellectual sophistication. They name themselves "African woman, warrior, priestess, and queen" (pp. 189-90), all suggestive of their call for the empowerment, strength, and courage of black women. The interpretive community includes the following women rappers as Queen Mothers: Queen Kenya, Queen Latifah, Sister Souljah, Nefertiti, Queen Mother, Isis, and Yo-Yo.

Although Queen Kenya was the first to take the label "Queen" as a stage name, Dana Owens is the first woman to record under that title. The most successful woman rapper in the Queen Mother category to date, Queen Latifah chose a name that was significant for all black women. The name Latifah, which means "feminine, delicate, and kind" (p. 190), was given to her by her Muslim cousin when she was only 8 years old, and she chose Queen Latifah instead of MC Latifah because it was new and fresh at the time she came into rap and because she regards herself and all other black women as queens. Queen Latifah's success extends beyond the field of rap. She wrote a best-selling autobiography entitled Ladies First: Revelations of a Strong Black Woman. Once the central character in the television sitcom "Living Single," Queen Latifah is now an

Oscar-nominated film actor. With her long-time friend Shakim Compere, she serves as the head of Flavor Unit, an artist management and record company.

As a Queen Mother category rapper, Latifah writes and performs lyrics that convey strong pro-black woman messages. Sometimes her raps address political and economic issues facing black women and the black community in general. Keyes provides an excerpt from Latifah's song "The Evil That Men Do" to illustrate the politics of her songs:

> Here is a message for my sisters and brothers
> Here are some things I wanna cover.
> A woman strives for a better life
> But who the hell cares because she's living on welfare?
> The government can't come up with a decent housing plan
> So she's in no-man's land.
> It's a sucker who tells you you're equal…
> Someone's livin' the good life tax-free
> 'Cause some poor girl can't be livin' crack free
> And that's just part of the message
> I thought I had to send you about the evil that men do. (p. 192)

In this song, Latifah challenges male supremacy by connecting men to what is wrong in the world. Latifah resists blaming the (black) woman (on welfare) for her economic difficulties and implicates the larger power structure of the government instead. Latifah suggests that the government has failed to provide what poor (black) women need to escape poverty because of its indifference toward their struggles. The representation of the woman in the song who is trying to do better for herself and her family problematizes the common stereotype of the lazy (black) welfare mother who does nothing to overcome her struggles, except to have additional children. A bold and daring statement, Latifah's song is a critique of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1989).

Another of Latifah's songs entitled "Ladies First" presents a woman-centered message of empowerment. It disputes the perception that women emcees are not as skilled as their male peers in the writing of rhymes. Latifah raps:

> I break into a lyrical freestyle
> Grab the mike, look at the crowd and see smiles
> 'Cause they see a woman standing up on her own two [feet]
> Sloppy slouching is something I won't do.
> Some think that we [women] can't flow
> Stereotypes they got to go.
> I'm gonna mess around and flip the scene into reverse,
> With a little touch of ladies first. (p. 192)

The video for this song extends the conversation about the strength of black women beyond the rap arena. Taken together, the collection of images assembled in part by Queen Latifah which includes live footage of South Africa's anti-apartheid riots and photographs of Harriet Tubman, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, Winnie Mandela, and Rosa Parks is a history lesson about the efforts of black women who have led resistance movements against oppression of all kinds around the globe and across generations. This video solidifies Latifah's placement in the Queen Mother category.

Another woman rapper Keyes identifies as a Queen Mother is Sister Souljah. On her only LP, which was released in 1992 entitled 360 Degrees of Power, she imagines "a police state where blacks fight the reinstitution of slavery" (p. 193). Earning the title "raptivist" because of her honest, yet "quasi-preachy" style (p. 193), Sister Souljah shares messages that focus on economic, racial, and gender equality as well as relationships between black women and men. Since the release of her one LP, which did not sell well, Sister Souljah has written an autobiography No Disrespect and a novel The Coldest

Winter Ever. Both are hip hop generation black working-class woman-centered tales, and each details the struggles of young black working-class women trying to pay bills, survive abusive relationships with men, escape the ghetto, develop closer relationships with their mothers, and love themselves. Both texts offer messages that speak to the determination of black women to keep on living and moving and hoping.

Keyes presents a brief description of the other women rappers she includes in the Queen Mother category:

> Nefertiti, Isis, and Queen Mother Rage depict the Queen Mother image via their names and attire. Lauryn Hill earns the title through her lyrics and her community outreach programs like the Refugee Project. Yo-Yo, who is also regarded by the interpretive community as a Queen Mother, uses her lyrics to promote her political ideology of black feminism and female respectability, as advanced by her organization, the Intelligent Black Women's Coalition (IBWC). (pp. 193-194)

Following the discussion of the Queen Mother category, Keyes explains the characteristics of women rappers who are Fly Girls. She connects "fly" to hip fashion, hair, and jewelry, and she traces its roots to the blaxploitation films of the late 1960s to the 1970s like Shaft (1971), Superfly (1972), The Mack (1973), and Foxy Brown (1974). The fly girl utilizes the latest fashions to accentuate features of her body considered to be beauty markers for black women by black culture: ample breasts, rounded buttocks, and thick thighs. These are the same physical attributes that have been deemed undesirable characteristics by mainstream American standards of beauty and that have been used to perpetuate the black woman jezebel stereotype. In contrast to mainstream representations of sexy, submissive women, the fly girl is not only sexy but also outspoken and fiercely independent. She is a "party-goer, an independent woman, an erotic subject rather than

an objectified object" (p. 195). Salt-N-Pepa epitomize the fly girl image. Keyes outlines Salt-N-Pepa's long list of fly girl characteristics:

> Salt-N-Pepa canonized the ultimate fly girl posture of rap by donning short, tight-fitting outfits, leather clothing, ripped jeans or punk clothing, glittering gold jewelry (i.e. earrings and necklaces), long sculpted nails, prominent make-up, and hairstyles ranging from braids to wraps to waves in ever-changing hair colors. (p. 194)

Keyes maintains that Salt-N-Pepa's performance of the fly girl is in keeping with Audre Lorde's notion (1984) of the transformative power of the erotic. Their conscious choice to wear clothes that draw attention to parts of their bodies considered too big, too round, and too thick to be beautiful in mainstream media, rather than cover them up in oversized attire made for men's body types, places them in a precarious position in the rap arena. They risk losing their credibility as legitimate, skilled emcees, and they chance being labeled whores. Through their performance of the fly girl, Salt-N-Pepa flip the script, or deconstruct dominant ideology, regarding what is beautiful and sexy. In so doing, they construct an identity that enables them to "write their own bodies" (Lawless, 1998, quoted in Keyes, p. 196). Salt-N-Pepa describe themselves as "women [who have] worked hard to keep our bodies in shape; we're proud to show them off…We're not ashamed of our sexuality; for we're Salt-N-Pepa—sexier and more in control" (p. 196).

In addition to Salt-N-Pepa, the interpretive community categorizes the group TLC as fly girls. TLC's songs tackle serious issues especially for black women: HIV/AIDS, rape, domestic violence, and self-esteem. Unlike the typical fly girls who wear revealing clothing, TLC wears colorful, oversized clothes for two reasons. They say: "We like to wear a lot of baggy stuff because for one, it's comfortable, and two, many of our fans don't have the so-called perfect figure; we don't want them to feel like they can't wear

what we're wearing" (p. 197). In the song "Unpretty," TLC asks women of all sizes to be committed to their mental and physical well-being and a healthy body image. In "His Story," they rap about Tawana Brawley, who alleged that white New York City police officers raped her. TLC also warns their audiences about the dangers of unprotected sex in "Waterfalls" and suggests that not wearing a condom may lead to death. Left Eye, the rapper of the group, wears oversized eyeglasses with a condom in place of an empty lens, and T-Boz and Chili, the other two women in the group, wear colorful condom packages pinned to the outside of their clothing. A silent, visual message, the wearing of condoms suggests sexual responsibility. In the video for this song, the lead male character chooses not to wear a condom in keeping with his partner's wishes, and days after the sexual encounter, he notices a lesion on his face, indicative of HIV infection. TLC utilizes the visual aesthetic of the fly girl to attract listeners for their lessons on the risks of sexual promiscuity and sexual irresponsibility.

Yo-Yo, a member of the Queen Mother category, can also be placed in the fly girl group because of her "gyrating hips, stylish golden-blonde braids, tight-fitting short outfits, and pronounced makeup" (p. 198). Like Salt-N-Pepa and TLC, Yo-Yo's songs are aimed at empowering black women. She advocates sisterhood among black women in "The I.B.W.C. National Anthem" and "Sisterland," and she raps about sexual restraint and responsibility in "You Can't Play with My Yo-Yo" and "Put a Lid on It." For a while, she even wrote an advice column called "Yo, Yo-Yo" in which she answered questions from hip hop generation youth about heterosexual relationships in Vibe, a popular mainstream periodical dedicated to all aspects of hip hop.

The most recent addition to the fly girl category is woman rapper, songwriter, and producer Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott. An innovator always ahead of everyone else, Missy plays with fashion to make critiques about the stereotypical imaging of black women. Sometimes she looks like herself in regular feminized fly girl gear, and at other times, she takes on the persona of an almost unrecognizable, genderless character. A full-figured and dark-skinned black woman with short hair, Missy chooses alternative ways to perform the fly girl image. For example, in the video for "Supa Dupa Fly," her first single, Missy floats around in a blown-up, oversized black trash bag. Reminiscent of singer, actress, and model Grace Jones, Missy paints her face black and dons a baldhead in the video for "She's A Bitch." Like Jones' dominatrix persona, Missy proclaims herself "a bitch," which she has redefined as a woman who is strong, powerful, and sure of herself in rap's male-dominated arena. In keeping with a more typical fly girl image, Missy has appeared alongside Madonna in recent Gap commercials, and she has served as spokesperson for Iman's lipstick line. Never predictable and always blurring boundaries, Missy shares much in common with the next category Keyes discusses, the Sista with Attitude.

Keyes draws on Geneva Smitherman's definition of "tude" (1994) to explain a Sista with Attitude. She says: "["Tude" is] a diminutive form of attitude, can be defined as an aggressive, arrogant, defiant, I-know-I'm-BAD pose or air about oneself; or an oppositional or negative outlook or disposition" (pp. 199-200). Women rappers who take on the Sista with Attitude persona use confidence as a means of empowerment in the rap arena. They present themselves as strong, independent women who are not afraid to go after what they want; they are capable of having it all: men, money, fame, and power.

Keyes mentions three early women rappers who fit into this category: Roxanne Shanté, Boss, and MC Lyte. She also identifies five current women rappers who are also labeled Sistas with Attitude: Da Brat, Eve, Mia X, Foxy Brown, and Lil Kim.

Keyes names Roxanne Shanté the "prototype" (p. 200) for the Sista with Attitude category. When she was only 14 years old, Shanté began her rap career in 1989 with a woman-centered answer rap to the song "Roxanne, Roxanne" by the all-male group UTFO/Full Force. In "Roxanne's Revenge," Shanté disses one of UTFO's members as "not really cute and not knowing how to operate sexually" (p. 201). Confident and daring, Shanté aims her insult at the core of black masculinity, his ability to perform the sexual act. In her song "Big Mama" from her second LP entitled Bitch is Back released three years later, Shanté chooses not to dis two-timing male lovers, the typical target of women rappers back then. Instead, Shanté selects popular women rappers of the time like Queen Latifah, Monie Love, MC Lyte, Isis, Yo-Yo, and Salt-N-Pepa to insult for their inferior rhyming skills. Declaring that she gave birth to most women rappers, she maintains that these other women rappers, "all bitches, copied her style, the capital S-H-A-N-T-É" (p. 201). Even though "Big Mama" resulted in negative personal attacks from other women rappers in response raps, Shanté never wavered in promoting herself as a confident bitch with attitude.

Keyes points out that MC Lyte, another early Sista with Attitude, also presents herself as strong and self-assured, but she does so without labeling herself a bitch or using much profanity in her raps. Lyte chooses to ridicule disloyal men for the lies they tell women, and her songs usually end in the defeat of the male character. For example, in "Paper Thin," Lyte lets her fictitious boyfriend Sam know that she is aware of his

cheating and is not fooled by his "paper thin" deceit. Without hostility, Lyte dismisses Sam along with all other men who treat women badly. They are not worth her attention and affection.

Keyes explains that one characteristic many women rappers in this category share is their choice to refer to competitors or male sexual partners as "motherfuckas," "niggas," or "thug niggas" (p. 200). Keyes maintains that these terms are prevalent in black signifying practices, especially this style of rap, and thus may have both negative and positive connotations, depending on the context. Another common characteristic among Sistas with Attitude is that many of them like Missy have chosen to reclaim the label "bitch," redefining it so that it is a positive title used to mean "an aggressive or assertive female who subverts patriarchal rule" (p. 200). Some women in Keyes' interpretive community are troubled by the use of the name, regardless of the new connotation, because they say that such designations "merely mar the images of young African American females" (p. 200). Several women rappers have chosen to take a position in the middle, agreeing that the title "bitch" may be problematic depending on its use, its intended target, and who is using the term. Queen Latifah shares her opinion about the label:

> I don't really mind the term. I play around with it. I use it with my homegirls like, 'Bitch are you crazy? Bitch is a fierce girl.' Or 'That bitch is so crazy, girl.' Now, that is not harmful. But 'This stupid bitch just came down here talking…,' now that is meant in a harmful way. So it's the meaning behind the word that to me decides whether I should turn it off or listen to it. (p. 200)

A few Sistas with Attitude who take on the bitch persona also assume the gangsta bitch role in some of their songs. First introduced in the song "Gangsta Bitch" by male rapper Apache, "the strapped gangsta bitch packs a 9mm gun, drinks forty-ounce beers, and

participates in stick-ups with her man" (p. 201). A typical gangsta bitch is also intensely loyal to her man and her women friends. Boss, a woman rapper in the early 1990s, popularized the image through dress and explicit language. During performance, Boss completely transformed her real-life upbringing—middle-class, Midwestern, and Catholic school-educated—for that of the gangsta bitch. Boss explains her rationale for taking on the persona, "I know what I'm doing, and I know how to make it in this [rap] business" (p. 201). Boss knows the formula for success in the rap industry; she must take on the image of ultimate blackness, a supposed hard thug figure from ghetto street culture.

Da Brat, Mia X, and Eve are three contemporary women rappers whom Keyes classifies as Sistas with Attitude and who sometimes assume the gangsta bitch personality in their raps. The first solo woman emcee to sell a million records, Da Brat is a rapper with a "foul mouth, an admitted tom-boy, [who] cusses like there's no tomorrow [but] has made that 'tude work for her" (McGregor, 1996, quoted in Keyes, p. 203). At the time of Keyes' writing, Mia X of the No Limit Family and Eve of Ruff Ryders were the lone women emcees in their all-male rap crews. They had to work the attitude to be able to earn respect as a legitimate rapper alongside their male peers.

Eve and Mia X took on the gangsta bitch persona most often when they were featured as guest rappers on songs by the men who share their record label. The songs were usually about ghetto street life, and Mia X and Eve used the gangsta bitch role to critique ghetto life in the South and urban Philadelphia, respectively, from a woman's perspective. Keyes compares two raps by Eve and Da Brat which both represent working-class black women who are loyal to their incarcerated male lovers: "In "Ghetto

Love," Da Brat boasts about her drug-dealer lover who showers her with a lavish lifestyle, whereas in "Gotta Man," Eve recalls times when her incarcerated man draws hearts with her name on the jail cell wall" (p. 204). Both women seem to romanticize love with their "sophisticated thugs" and "motherfuckin niggas" (p. 204), but they also call attention to the ever-increasing black male prison population and the black working-class women who are left to raise children and pay bills alone. On a deeper level, these women condemn the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1989) responsible for the unremitting imprisonment of mostly poor black men, the forced separation of black men from their families, and the continuation of poverty among black women.

Lil Kim and Foxy Brown are the last two women rappers Keyes includes in the Sistas with Attitude category, but she says that both women also fall into the Fly Girl category because of their conflation of both fly and hardcore attitudes in their raps and video performances. Nicknamed the "Thelma and Louise of rap" and "the bad girls of hip hop," Lil Kim and Foxy Brown have been condemned by some members of the interpretive community for being "highly materialistic, violent, [and] lewd" (Morgan, 1997, quoted in Keyes, p. 204). Lil Kim, especially, is often blamed for perpetuating a contemporary version of the jezebel stereotype—the ho—because of her highly sexualized raps, dress, and videos. Refashioning her look with breast implants, blue contact lenses, and a blonde wig, she has attracted even more negative criticism. Keyes offers an opinion about Lil Kim's sexually suggestive lyrical content and her changes in physical appearance from a member of her interpretive community. Keyes quotes Britton (2000) who questions Kim's motives for projecting a highly sexualized image: "Kim is not making a fashion statement but is instead caught up in a world of make-believe,

movie stardom, superficiality—sex, money, and power—the antithesis of female hip-hop figures like Queen Latifah and Sister Souljah" (Britton quoted in Keyes, p. 205). Britton is critical of Kim for "professing in her lyrics that the ultimate way to 'get yours' is to be a supreme bitch and make men pay for a taste" (Britton quoted in Keyes, p. 205). A more nuanced analysis of Kim's image is necessary.

Missing in the censure of Lil Kim is an examination of any one (or combination) of the following issues: the kind and amount of control Kim has over her image, our own fears regarding bold assertions of black women's sexuality, our own hidden desire for Lil Kim, the role of the media in perpetuating the jezebel stereotype, traditional standards of beauty centered around whiteness, and the politics of the rap industry. Keyes compares Kim's "bad girl" image to the "badman" character (e.g., John Hardy, Dolemite, and Stackolee) popularized in the toast, a uniquely African American oral narrative form. In these long poems, black badmen brag about their sexual prowess with many women; getting over on the (white) man, especially the (white) police; and wild partying. Keyes explains what bad girls do:

> The "empowered female" rendering of the "badman" includes those sistas who brag about partying and smoking blunts (marijuana) with their men; seducing, repressing, and sexually emasculating male characters; or dissin their would-be competitors (male and female)—all through figurative speech. (p. 206)

Badmen are respected. They are baaadasses who "ain't taking no shit from nobody" and who "fuck" as many women—preferably white and/or light—as they can. Bad girls do not enjoy the same standard of admiration. They are reduced to sluts and whores and bitches.

Keyes points to hip hop feminist critic Joan Morgan (1997) who worries that the bad girls' inversion of the badman persona is problematic, for it represents a "misuse of sex and feminism and a devaluing of black men" (Morgan quoted in Keyes, p. 206). Morgan warns that bad girls risk a short career because in copying what badmen do—smoking, drinking, fucking, and bragging—they are not expanding the range of empowering images for themselves and future women rappers. Instead, the image limits the power women rappers can attain in the business. Morgan suggests that "those sisters who selectively ration their erotic power" (p. 206) are the women rappers who gain and keep the most power in the industry. Bad girls—and more generally Sistas with Attitude—spice up the conversation critics have about women rappers. They create representations of black women that are difficult to read. These representations require complex analyses that do not rely on monolithic understandings of black women.

Keyes' final category is "The Lesbian," which she says emerged "from the closet" in the late 1990s (p. 206). Keyes is the only critic I have read who addresses queerness and women rappers; this category is underdeveloped compared to the other three. Keyes includes brief mention of one song by Queen Pen. In her song "Girlfriend," which was released on a mainstream record, Queen Pen takes on the persona of the suitor in a lesbian relationship and raps about a lesbian lifestyle from a black woman's perspective. She does so against a backdrop of intense homophobia in the black rap community specifically and the black community in general. She also struggles against racism as a black woman performer. Queen Pen compares herself to Ellen DeGeneres and k.d. lang. She says:

> But you know, Ellen [DeGeneres] can talk about any ol' thing and it's all right. With everybody, it's all right. With "Girlfriend," I'm getting all kinds of questions…This song is buggin' everyone out right now. [If] you got Ellen, you got k.d [lang], why shouldn't urban lesbians go to a girl club and hear their own thing? (p. 207)

Interestingly enough, Keyes points out that while Queen Pen openly discusses lesbian culture on her record, she has been "somewhat coy about her sexuality in personal interviews" (Jamison, 1998, quoted in Keyes, p. 206). She has also kept her audiences guessing by calling into question the typical look of a lesbian. Sometimes she appears ultra-femme in makeup and sexy dress, and at other times, she seems more masculine wearing hip hop dress styles generally associated with male rappers and performing "hand gestures and a bobbing walk" (p. 208) normally linked to b-boy street culture. Whatever her sexual preference, Queen Pen has publicly played with the representation of sexuality and gender in the rap arena.

Conclusion

Keyes ends her chapter with some overall conclusions about women rappers. Even though women rappers work in a sexist, male-dominated industry that often limits their opportunity to express themselves in women-centered ways, they have managed to carve out public space for their voices to be heard. Women rappers, especially since the late 1990s, have achieved success in all facets of the business, including performing, writing, producing, and launching their own record labels and clothing lines. As a result, they have gained more control over their own images, earned respect from their peers as legitimate emcees, and enjoyed increased support from fans. They have become significant players in public representations of hip hop generation black women.

In the following chapter, I move from a discussion of hip hop women defining themselves as performers to a discussion of the texts hip hop women create. I conclude the third part of my literature review by focusing on analyses by Angela Davis (1998) and Tricia Rose (1994) of blues women's and women rappers' texts. Both Davis' and Rose's analyses rely on a complex framework for understanding black women performers' texts that takes into account their relationship with (instead of only opposition to) multiple discourses, such as rap discourses, sexualized representations of black women in historical discourses, feminist theory, and black feminist theory. These women theorists' dialogic readings of texts by earlier generations of women performers lay important foundation for my own examination of contemporary women rappers' texts.

CHAPTER FOUR
FRAMING THE STORIES OF "SWEET MAMAS" AND "BAD SISTAS": A REVIEW OF TWO CRITIQUES OF BLUES AND RAP WOMEN'S TEXTS

Introduction

Angela Davis and Tricia Rose have written analyses of texts by black women blues singers and black women rappers, respectively, which serve as models for my own study of women rappers' texts. Both Davis and Rose write their analyses using a dialogic framework that calls attention to the ways blues women's and women rappers' texts are in dialogue with other discourses. That is, they are interested in understanding the ways in which black women blues singers and rappers are engaged in "call-and-response" with other black women, black men, and the larger American culture. Davis and Rose examine blues women's and women rappers' sexual narratives in relation to a variety of discourses so as to "consider the ways in which women rappers [and blues women] work within and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture" (Rose, 1994, p. 147) and to locate moments in songs in which "hints of feminist attitudes emerge from their music through fissures of patriarchal discourses" (Davis, 1998, p. xi). Black heterosexual and lesbian relationships, the significance of black women's voices, and black women's public expressions of physical, sexual, and economic freedom are three important themes Davis and Rose discuss in relation to each group of women performers' songs. Their analyses reveal that blues women in the early twentieth century and women rappers at the end of the same century sing about black women who are sexually confident, openly express their sexual desire for women and men, insist on economic and sexual independence for women, and resist men's domination, especially over black women's bodies.

In this chapter, I review the parts of Davis' Blues Legacies and Black Feminism (1998) that are thematically tied to my own readings of black women rappers' texts, and then I move to a discussion of "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music," a chapter from Rose's Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America (1994). My review focuses on the ways in which Davis and Rose show how both sets of black women performers offer critiques of dominant conceptions of romantic love, beauty, and black womanhood and the ways in which they situate the texts of both sets of black women performers within a multi-voiced dialogue to complicate their meaning(s).

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism

Blues Legacies and Black Feminism (1998) is Angela Davis' analysis of the recorded performances of early twentieth century blues women singers Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. Davis' book is divided into two parts: eight chapters, each centered on a theme connected to blues women's representations of black working-class women's lives, and an appendix that contains lyrics to songs by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Even though Davis' text is not an analysis of cultural productions by black women rappers, it is useful to my study because of the relevance of Davis' overall argument and the themes she develops in each of her chapters. Understanding blues women's music as a site for "examining a historical feminist consciousness that reflected the lives of working-class black communities" (p. xv), Davis locates moments in blues women's songs in which "hints of feminist attitudes emerge from their music through fissures of patriarchal discourses" (p. xi).

Davis examines the texts of blues women the way I study the texts of women rappers in that she uses a dialogic framework to analyze the relationships among race, gender, class, and sexuality in the representation of black women's identities through popular music. She uncovers the ways in which blues women played with blues conventions and themes to express a consciousness that working-class black women of the time would understand and from which they could learn, perhaps become empowered. Davis organizes her analysis around significant themes that Rainey, Smith, and Holiday addressed in their songs, and I will review the following chapters because they are thematically tied to my own readings of black women rappers' texts: "I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity," "Mama's Got The Blues: Rivals, Girlfriends, and Advisors," "Here Come My Train: Traveling Themes and Women's Blues," and "Blame It On The Blues: Bessie Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and the Politics of Blues Protest."

I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity

The focus of the first chapter, "I Used To Be Your Sweet Mama," is blues women's representations of black women's sexuality. Davis pays particular attention to the ways in which Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith resist dominant conceptions of romantic love in their songs and blur the line between public and private spheres in their condemnation of domestic violence inflicted upon black women by black men. Rainey and Smith keep it real—to borrow a phrase from hip hop vernacular—on sexual relationships between black women and men. They sing the blues about men who lie and cheat, who beat women and abandon their families. They also sing the blues to boldly express black women's sexual desire and desirability, sometimes for men and sometimes

for other women. These were themes that Davis says were not represented in mainstream popular music. Blues women's sexualized representations were distinctly different.

Davis attributes the absence of romanticized images of love and marriage in blues women's songs to the historical realities facing working-class black women of the time. She explains that after emancipation, many black women had to find ways to survive on their own because large numbers of black men had to (sometimes chose to) travel the country in search of work. The lives of newly emancipated black women were difficult and their relationships strained because of poverty. They were forced to remain strong for themselves and their children even if rejected by a male lover, because they could not sit at home, cry morning and night, and wait for him to come back home. This reality in post-bellum black America is the milieu in which (and sometimes against which) blues women crafted their songs. These women gave "expression to larger considerations reflecting worldviews specific to black working-class communities" (p. 21).

Rainey's and Smith's songs were most often about strong, single, independent women who were able to move freely about the country, that is, travel outside of the South, because they were not constrained by domestic responsibilities. Even though the women characters in blues women's songs did not mirror exactly the lives of most black women who could not afford to travel and who were bound by domestic obligations, blues women's songs did reflect black women's independent spirit, and they did challenge dominant notions of the ideal woman. The women in Rainey's and Smith's songs were "seldom wives and almost never mothers" (p. 12), a sign that they did not depend solely on marriage and family for happiness, and they could not be contained by

the domestic sphere. They also communicated their autonomy through explicit expression of sexual desire. Davis explains:

> [Blues women] found ways to express themselves that were at variance with the prevailing standards of femininity. Even as they may have shed tears, they found the courage to lift their heads and fight back, asserting their right to be respected not as appendages or victims of men but as truly independent human beings with vividly articulated sexual desires. (p. 20)

Even though abandonment is a common theme in women's blues, the tone that blues women convey is not hopelessness. According to Davis, the women characters in their songs choose "independence and assertiveness—indeed defiance—bordering on and sometimes erupting into violence" (p. 21). These women characters love to dance, drink, and party; they don't take no shit from men; and they are not afraid to admit publicly their desire for sex. In the song "Prove It On Me Blues," Rainey's sexual assertions include lesbian representations. Davis says that Ma Rainey's peers and fans knew about her real-life sexual involvement with women. The song, a challenge to heterosexism, "vacillates between the subversive hidden activity of women loving women and a public declaration of lesbianism" (Carby, 1986, quoted in Davis, p. 40). Refusing silence and submissiveness, blues women declare their equality with men in all arenas.

In addition to resisting dominant conceptions of romantic love and ideal womanhood in their songs, blues women also blur the line between public and private spheres in their condemnation of domestic violence against black women. Davis maintains that the naming of male violence by blues women in their songs transforms a private issue that has historically been shrouded in silence into a public social problem that can then be discussed, critiqued, and resisted by society at large. Davis explains how

the blues genre depends on the act of naming to construct a public dialogue about and collective protest against social problems affecting the black community:

> The music genre is called the "blues"…because it names, in myriad ways, the social and psychic afflictions and aspirations of African Americans. Through the blues, menacing problems are ferreted out from the isolated individual experience and restructured as problems shared by the community. As shared problems, threats can be met and addressed within a public and collective context. (p. 33)

According to Davis, even though Rainey and Smith name the problem of male violence, they do not offer an analysis of the sources, or larger culture of violence, that contribute(s) to men's general hostility toward women.

Davis notes another interesting absence in Rainey's and Smith's songs, that is, sexual violence or rape. She connects this absence to the larger historical context of the time in which black men were lynched on the false charge of raping white women. Black men were deemed hypersexualized beasts always ready to rape white women. Middle-class black women like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell fought through public discourses to expose the barbarity of white lynchers, to prove black men innocent of false rape charges, and to challenge the prevailing connection between white womanhood and purity. Davis concludes that the "discourse on rape was so thoroughly influenced by the prevailing racism that intraracial rape could not be named" by black women blues singers (p. 34).

Davis does not point out these absences in blues women's songs to critique them but rather to show the limits of the blues form. The women in blues women's songs are rarely represented as victims who do not fight against men who batter them. Instead, blues women choose characters with whom working-class women could identify, women who "frequently brandish their razors and guns, and dare men to cross the lines they

draw" (p. 34), in other words, women who kick ass when they have been abandoned or abused. Davis concludes the chapter with a summary of the significance of blues women, a description that could easily apply to contemporary women rappers:

> The blues women openly challenged the gender politics implicit in traditional cultural representations of marriage and heterosexual love and relationships. Refusing, in the blues tradition of raw realism, to romanticize romantic relationships, they instead exposed the stereotypes and explored the contradictions of those relationships. By so doing, they redefined women's "place." They forged and memorialized images of tough, resilient, and independent women who were unafraid neither of their own vulnerability nor of defending their right to be respected as autonomous human beings. (p. 41)

Mama's Got The Blues: Rivals, Girlfriends, and Advisors

Davis focuses on the representations of Rainey and Smith that reveal a complicated sisterhood among black working-class women. Blues women's songs sometimes represent black women as individuals in competition with each other for a male lover, and at other times, they emphasize "friendship, sisterhood, love, and solidarity between women" (p. 45) so as to resist male domination. Davis links the antagonism among women sometimes present in blues women's songs to the historical reality at the time for working-class blacks. According to Davis, emancipated black women and men experienced a "new individuality" (p. 46) because the end of enslavement created a different context for relationships among black folks, especially working-class men and women in competition with each other for jobs. While black women and men "perceive[d] their individual selves as welded together within the community," they also understood themselves as "different from and in opposition to one another" (p. 46). Blues women chose to represent this "new individuality" (p. 46) in their songs to illustrate the complex interactions among black working-class women in

heterosexual relationships. Contemporary hip hop women also choose to represent a similar kind of complicated sisterhood in their raps.

Even though blues women's songs do not always present women in happy community with one another, Davis is definite in her assertion that their songs deserve attention for their community-building potential among black working-class women. Davis compares blues women's songs to the uplift messages of the middle-class black women's club movement, and Davis maintains that middle-class black women were not the only women involved in a public effort of community-building during the early twentieth century. Black women blues performers used the blues form to create representations that served to build community—a shared sense of sisterhood—among black working-class women. They did so in very different ways from women's club movement's efforts at "consciousness-raising" (p. 42). Unlike club women who took on the cause of "defending our name against pervasive charges of immorality and sexual promiscuity" (p. 44), blues women did not keep silent about issues of sexuality. They did not, like their middle-class sisters, "assume the missionary role of introducing 'true womanhood' to their less fortunate sisters" (p. 65). Blues women defined black womenhood by not shying away from asserting black women's sexuality in their songs. Davis explains the importance of sexual agency to black working-class women:

> Sexuality was one of the few realms in which masses of African-American women could exercise autonomy—and thus tangibly distinguish their contemporary status from the history of enslavement. Denial of sexual agency was in an important respect the denial of freedom for working-class black women. (p. 44)

Blues women's songs exemplify an important challenge to club movement women's "bourgeois notions of sexual purity and true womanhood" (p. 44) as they construct

another language in the representation of black women's sexual identities, a language that black working-class women could understand in the context of their lives.

Davis examines two sets of songs. The first group of songs deal with themes of women's rivalry, and the second set are songs of advice for women in heterosexual relationships. Layered in contradiction, the first set of songs are "the most complicated expressions of women's independence and assertiveness" because they are "interwoven with themes of female rivalry over a male lover" (p. 47). The first set of songs characterizes women's strength as something to be gained at the expense of other (weaker) women. In songs by Rainey and Smith, Davis locates strong, independent women protagonists who boldly warn other women to stay away from their men. They express their willingness to engage in physical confrontation with other women if necessary to maintain their position of power, that is, to win the man all to themselves. Sometimes physical confrontations end violently in the songs; women are beaten, shot, and poisoned by other women in a few songs by Rainey and Smith. Davis explains the violence in these women's songs:

> These performed lyrics provide a glimpse of a kind of working-class women's community-building that, rather than advocating violence, proclaims women's complexity by refusing to deny or downplay female antagonism. The jealousy and competitiveness that was so openly expressed in the blues surely also characterized middle-class women's relations with each other. (p. 48)

Blues women were not afraid to represent interactions among black women as they really were sometimes: messy, unpredictable, and contentious exchanges between equals. Blues women represented a more complex black woman, one with whom many different black women could identify.

The majority of songs by blues women performers do not include women in competition with each other. Instead, blues women offer advice to the women in their audiences about improving their lives and their sexual relationships with men. Davis identifies a "pedagogical" (p. 53) community-building strategy in blues women's songs of advice, namely that they share stories so as to teach women through example how to empower themselves. Linking blues women's community-building strategy of sharing personal stories to a similar consciousness-raising strategy used in the 1960s women's liberation movement, Davis explains the significance of conversations among women about male domination:

> Consciousness-raising groups affirmed the most dramatic insight of the early women's liberation movement: the personal is political. Individual women shared personal experiences with the aim of rendering explicit the underlying politics shaping women's lives…Black women generally found it difficult to identify with the strategy of consciousness-raising. In retrospect, however, it is possible to detect ways in which the sharing of personal relationships in blues culture prefigured consciousness-raising. (pp. 54-55)

Some of the advice blues women offer to their audiences include warnings about the ways in which men try to seduce/trick them, calls for women to leave abusive relationships, suggestions for managing men so as to achieve a satisfying relationship, and instructions for keeping other women from stealing men skilled in the sexual gratification of women.

Blues women's conversations with their women audiences utilized the traditional West African practice of call-and-response. The success of the advice song depended on the communal back and forth-ness of the call-and-response form. Davis says that blues women often established an "imagined community of women" (p. 57) by directly addressing women listeners in their songs. For example, Rainey begins "Trust No Man"

by saying “I want all you women to listen to me,” and Smith talks to younger women when she says, “Girls, take this tip from me” in her song “Pinchback Blues.” Calling on women specifically to pay attention to what they have to say, blues women bring their female audiences into a dialogue in which they become active participants. Blues women issue the call by creating fictional women with whom their working-class women audiences can identify—women who assert their sexuality and at the same time stress the need for women’s financial independence. They link black women’s sexual and financial freedom.

Female blues performers sing about women who are sexually confident, openly express their sexual desire for women and men, insist on financial and sexual independence for women, and resist men’s domination, especially over black women’s bodies. Black women respond in a variety of ways when the stories blues women tell resonate with their lives. They attend live performances, purchase recordings, bear witness to the truths communicated in blues songs, make meaning of their own lives, and perhaps even resist black and white male supremacy. The responses are innumerable. Davis concludes that this communal conversation between women performers and audiences represents a mode of empowerment for black working-class women and a disruption in the patriarchal public sphere.

Davis examines a variety of advice songs by Rainey and Smith. One kind of advice song stresses the necessity of women’s economic independence. In “Safety Mama,” Smith suggests that women organize a “rent shake” or rent party in which guests are required to pay an admission fee for music, food, and fun so that women can become self-supporting, and in “Pinchback Blues,” she urges women to “get a workin’ man”

when they marry rather than be seduced by a smooth talking man who can only offer empty promises (pp. 58-59). Another kind of advice song tells women what to do in relationships with good men. In "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Smith offers the following advice: "Hug him in the morning, kiss him at night/Give him plenty lovin', treat your good man right" (p. 62). A third kind of advice song counsels women about their troubled relationships with men. Davis says that these songs "encourage intimacy and familiarity between women" (p. 62) because blues women performers construct these songs as though they are conversing with their sisterfriends about man problems. Davis explains the impact of these songs: "These girlfriends console them by implicitly confirming similar events in their own histories, thus providing emotional support and enabling women to confront such disruptive moments with attitudes that move from victimization to agency" (p. 62).

Davis shares a few conclusions about the significance of blues women's advice songs. Blues women performers were able to conjure a communal spirit among working-class black women by singing about issues connected to their daily lives. Taboo subjects like black women's sexuality were not off limits to blues women performers. Through their women protagonists, blues women taught their female audiences how to empower themselves. While acknowledging the importance of the middle-class club women's efforts to defend black women's collective name in public discourses, Davis also credits blues women for defending the name of black working-class women. She explains:

> The production, performance, and reception of women's blues during the decade of the twenties reveal that black women's names could be defended by working-class as well as middle-class women. Women's blues also demonstrated that working-class women's names could be defended not only in the face of the

> dominant white culture but in the face of male assertions of dominance in black communities as well. (p. 65)

Here Come My Train: Traveling Themes and Women's Blues

Davis explains the ways in which Rainey and Smith use the common blues theme of traveling to challenge the stereotypical notion that women's place is in the home. Davis shows how "blues representations of women engaged in self-initiated and independent travel constitute a significant moment of ideological opposition to the prevailing assumptions about women's place in society" (p. 67). Situating the historical context for songs by Rainey and Smith at the end of enslavement, Davis maintains that a connection exists in blues women's songs between black women's freedom to travel and their autonomy in their sexual lives. According to Davis in the first chapter, newly emancipated blacks experienced independence in two important areas, travel and sexuality. Blues women linked these two in relation to black women in their songs. For example, in many of Rainey's and Smith's songs like "Leaving This Morning, "Lost Wandering Blues, " "Walking Blues," "Packing Trunk Blues," "South Bound Blues," and "Bessemer Bound Blues," women leave home to meet a lover in another city or to search for a new sexual partner when a romantic relationship fails. Leaving home, these traveling women resist the confines and obligations of the domestic sphere and take on new possibilities, new freedoms.

Davis begins by explaining the history of traveling in relation to newly emancipated black women and men. Davis locates gender differences in this history. For ex-enslaved men, even those who were fathers, travel became necessary to search for jobs, but for ex-enslaved women with children, travel was not usually possible because of

cost and not usually necessary because domestic job opportunities were available close to home. Traveling, an important freedom for newly emancipated black folks, became an important theme in blues. Davis points out that the wandering blues man is a common figure, but the traveling blues woman is less often represented, probably indicative of the boundaries placed on women's movement at the time. Blues women performers were among the few women who were as mobile as men at the beginning of the twentieth century. Blues women had to tour across the country to make money, so their domestic lives were far different from the women in their audiences. According to Davis, most blues women performers were wives, but few were mothers. Blues women did not have to experience the confinement of domesticity like most of the women in their audiences. Even though most women in their audiences could not travel where and when they wished, blues women performers sang songs about women who did travel freely. Davis describes some of Rainey's traveling songs:

> Rainey's music presented women who did not have to acquiesce to men who set out on the road, leaving their female partners behind. The female characters in her songs also left home, and they often left their male partners behind. They were female subjects who were free of the new, postslavery fetters of domestic responsibilities and domestic service outside the home. (p. 72)

These songs offered women audiences representations of female independence and mobility, which reinforced a connection between black women's ability to travel with their ability to determine the outcomes of their lives. Davis points out that women's freedom to make decisions about travel was directly linked to control over their sexual lives. As evidence of this, Davis explains that blues women performers borrowed the male technique of bragging about the numbers of sexual partners they had while touring. Boasting about how many men they slept with while on the road "attested to [blues

women's] extensive travels, and was a sign of their determination to redefine black womanhood as active, assertive, independent, and sexual" (p. 75).

After Davis explains the associations that blues women make between independence, travel, and sexuality in their songs, she describes how they represent the traveling woman. She is often walking or hopping a train. For blues women, the destination is not as important as the trip. Self-determination comes as a result of the journey or the process of traveling, not in the end result. Sometimes in their songs, blues women characterize travel as an emotional journey, not a literal physical move to another place. They encourage women to keep moving, keep going, keep persevering, in other words, to keep on keeping on no matter what difficulties they must struggle against. Davis quotes Sandra Lieb's (1981) description of songs that represent women on an emotional journey:

> [These songs are] characterized by an emphasis on action rather than emotional excess. Less self-indulgent, the woman is in motion, on the streets instead of crying in her bed; she has left the house, moving away from solitary depression to activity in the world. (p. 79)

The women in blues women's songs do not have the luxury of staying still. They must keep going if they are to survive. These songs stress to black women audiences the necessity of movement in sustaining themselves emotionally, spiritually, and sexually.

> Blame It On The Blues: Bessie Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, and the Politics of Blues Protest

Davis' purpose is two-fold in the fourth chapter "Blame It On The Blues." First, she refutes (mis)characterizations of the blues as complaint, and second, she shows how blues women utilize the blues form as a method of social protest. Davis points out that three blues scholars, specifically Edward Brooks, Paul Oliver, and Samuel Charters, do

not consider the blues a kind of social protest. Defining protest very narrowly, these three critics suggest that the blues is not political because they argue that the blues is mostly about the personal story of the performer rather than a critique of collective social problems or a call for organized, collective demonstration. In short, they reduce the blues to a form of complaint by a lone blues performer about his individual struggles. Davis disagrees with these three scholars' discussion of the blues as complaint rather than social protest. For her, protest does not necessarily involve "the existence of formal political channels through which dissent can be collectively expressed" (p. 101). Political resistance can happen through art forms, especially the blues. She explains:

> 'Protest,' when expressed through aesthetic forms, is rarely a direct call to action. Nevertheless, critical aesthetic representation of a social problem must be understood as constituting powerful social and political acts…Public articulation of complaint—of which there are many instances in the blues—must be seen as a form of contestation of oppressive conditions, even when it lacks a dimension of organized political protest. (p. 101)

Davis warns against placing too great a burden on art to launch a mass movement. She says that art may "encourage a critical attitude and urge its audience to challenge social conditions, but it cannot establish the terrain of protest by itself" (p. 113). By transforming a private problem into a public concern through the process of naming it, blues performers help to stimulate a spirit of resistance in their audiences. A similar spirit of resistance can be found in other genres of black music. Davis notes that in addition to the blues, social protest themes can be found in jazz, rhythm and blues, funk, and rap.

After refuting the arguments made by Brooks, Oliver, and Charters, Davis examines blues songs by Rainey and Smith for their social protest characteristics. While

most blues women's songs deal with love and sexuality, they also comment on social problems affecting black folks in the years following enslavement. For example, Davis explores a number of songs that connect love and sexuality with issues such as work, poverty, crime, jail, prostitution, lynching, homelessness, natural disasters, and male domination. Smith recorded "Poor Man's Blues" and "Washwoman's Blues," two songs about poor black men and women, respectively. Smith and Rainey recorded a number of songs about the racism and sexism of the convict-lease system including "Jail House Blues," "Work House Blues," "Sing Sing Prison Blues," "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair," and "Chain Gang Blues." Holiday recorded her famous "Strange Fruit" about the lynching of black men. Smith sang "Backwater Blues" about the devastating Mississippi flood of 1927 in which the rising of the river caused hundreds of thousands of people to lose everything they owned.

Rainey and Smith were not afraid to sing about taboo social issues like prostitution. Rainey's "Hustlin' Blues" is about a woman prostitute who turns in her male pimp to the police because she is tired of him beating her and who says she is ready to quit prostitution. All of these songs address collective social problems black men and women faced in the years following enslavement. Davis maintains that blues women's public naming of the problems was an important step toward change. Davis concludes the chapter with remarks about the significance of protest characteristics of blues women's recorded performances:

> Gertrude Rainey's and Bessie Smith's songs may be interpreted precisely as historical preparation for political protest. They are certainly far more than complaint, for they begin to articulate a consciousness that takes into account social conditions of class exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of the complex emotional responses of black female subjects.

> While there may not be a direct line to social activism, activist stances are inconceivable without the consciousness such songs suggest. (p. 119)

The same can be said about contemporary women rappers' recorded performances. Like the songs sung by their blues women foremothers, women's raps have the potential to raise consciousness about social issues affecting hip hop generation audiences, particularly the concerns affecting the daily lives of young black working-class women.

Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music

Extending the dialogical analysis of blues women's texts by Davis, Tricia Rose suggests a complex framework for understanding black women rappers' sexual narratives that takes into account their connections to multiple discourses in "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music." Unlike other cultural critics, Rose resists placing black women rappers' texts in complete opposition to those of their male peers. Instead, she insists that they be situated within various other discourses, such as rap discourses, sexualized representations of black women in historical discourses, feminist theory, and black feminist theory. Rose's framework draws on George Lipsitz's (1990) notion of the dialogic nature of popular music. Rose quotes Lipsitz's explanation of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism as it relates to popular music:

> Popular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or last word. The traces of the past that pervade the popular music of the present amount to more than mere chance: they are not simply juxtapositions of incompatible realities. They reflect a dialogic process, one embedded in collective history and nurtured by the ingenuity of artists interested in fashioning icons of opposition…Popular music arbitrates tensions between opposition and co-optation at any given historical moment. (Lipsitz quoted in Rose, 1994, p. 148)

Because a dialogic framework does not allow for binary oppositions between men and women emcees and provides space for black women's simultaneous support and critique of black male rappers, it is useful for the examination of black women's raps. Sometimes women rappers resist negative stereotypical images of black women's identities at the same time that they reify them in public discourses. Rose explains:

> Some female rappers affirm aspects of sexual power relationships as they raise incisive questions that seriously challenge the current distribution of power between men and women. Works by black women rappers that place black women's bodies in the spotlight have a similarly contradictory effect; they affirm black female beauty and yet often preserve the logic of female sexual objectification. (p. 147)

In short, relocating women rappers' cultural productions within (and sometimes against) a multi-voiced dialogue results in a more thorough analysis of the representations of the gendered, raced, sexualized, and classed tensions in women rappers' texts.

Isolating women rappers' cultural productions from other discourses that help in making meaning leads to a narrow, simplistic understanding. Rose maintains that much discussion of women rappers' texts is simplistic for two reasons. One problem Rose names is that critics have to add women's contributions to the rap tradition because too often women rappers' participation in rap has been omitted and/or misrepresented. She singles out two male cultural critics for their inaccurate assessment of women's participation in rap or the omission of them altogether.

In "Hybridity, the Rap Race and Pedagogy for the 1990s," Houston Baker (1991) attributes the formation of rap to a "resentment of disco culture and a reassertion of black manhood" (p. 151). Rose problematizes Houston's assertion that links black masculinity to the origins of rap for its heterosexist assumptions and omission of women as active

participants since the early days of rap. Like Baker, Nelson George (1989) excludes any recognition of women in "Rap's Tenth Birthday," an anniversary tribute to the genre of rap in which he provides a timeline for the major events since the beginnings of rap and a list of twenty of the major players in the industry. In his tribute, George laments what he sees as the impending demise of rap because of mainstream corporate cooptation. He expresses his fears this way:

> To proclaim the death of rap is to be sure, premature. But the farther the control of rap gets from its street corner constituency and the more corporations grasp it—record conglomerates, Burger King, Minute Maid, Yo! MTV Raps, etc.—the more vulnerable it becomes to cultural emasculation. (George quoted in Rose, p. 152)

George constructs rap in gendered terms. He connects rap to black men. He worries that the "penetration" of outside influences—interestingly enough, the ones George mentions are white male-controlled—will lead to rap's feminization which will then lead to its (sexual) death.

The second problem Rose identifies is that too many cultural critics wrongly attach the feminist label to women rappers. She says that always naming women rappers' texts feminist expressions is based on a number of faulty assumptions. Rose explains that men and women rappers enjoy a much more blurred relationship than the monolith of sexist male rappers battling feminist women rappers. The performances of women and men rappers result in both sexes challenging boundaries all the time. Sometimes in tension with one another but rarely in absolute conflict, women and men emcees battle and defend each other. At times, Rose says that women rappers' sexual narratives uphold heterosexist, "patriarchal notions about family life and traditional roles of husbands, fathers, and lovers," and a significant number of male rappers' sexual stories "not only

chastise men for abusing women but also call for male responsibility in childrearing and support the centrality of black women in black cultural life" (p. 150). Rose explains with descriptions of a few specific women's and men's raps:

> [The male rap group] De La Soul's "Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa" is a brilliant and poignant story about a young girl whose father's sexual abuse of her and her inability to convince adults of his crime drives her to kill him. [The male rap group] A Tribe Called Quest's "Description of a Fool" defines a fool as, among other things, a man who hits a woman…[The female rap duo] Salt-n-Pepa's "Independent" attacks a man whose weakness is a product of his incapacity to provide material possessions and his limited economic means, a move that sustains the link between masculinity and economic privilege. (pp. 150-151)

This is a complex hip hop sexual discourse, indeed.

After Rose explains dialogism as a useful framework for the analysis of women rappers' texts, she examines two songs by women rappers that address black heterosexual relationships in relation to other social discourses, and then she focuses on Queen Latifah's lyrics and video for "Ladies First" as an example of a strong black woman-centered public voice. Next, she discusses black women rappers' public expressions of physical and sexual independence. Finally, Rose explains black women rappers' resistance to being labeled "feminist" even though critics have constructed them as feminist voices in rap.

Courting Disaster

Rose examines two songs by women rappers about black heterosexual relationships and their connections to other social discourses. "Tramps" and "Paper Thin" by Salt-n-Pepa and MC Lyte, respectively, are raps that address the tensions between men and women in sexual relationships. These two songs are similar to other women's raps on the subject of male-female relations. Rose explains that for the most

part, when women rappers create representations about relationships between black women and men, they resist demeaning distortions of black women as gold diggers and whores. While some raps are about women who "take advantage of the logic of heterosexual courtship in which men coax women into submission with trinkets and promises for financial security" (p. 155) and women who cheat (or "get over") on men, many women's raps condemn men's lying and infidelity and celebrate women's independence. Salt-n-Pepa and MC Lyte are known for their raps about men's mistreatment and exploitation of women, but Rose contends that their raps are not "mournful ballads" (p. 155) about the harsh realities of being a heterosexual black woman. Rose compares these women's raps to women's blues:

> Similar to women's blues, they [women's raps] are caustic, witty, and aggressive warnings directed at men and at other women who might be seduced by them in the future. By offering a woman's interpretation of the terms of heterosexual courtship, these women's raps cast a new light on male-female sexual power relations and depict women as resistant, aggressive participants. (p. 155)

Rose is correct to point out that even though women rappers call into question women's roles in relationships, they often "retain the larger patriarchal parameters of heterosexual courtship" (p. 155).

Rose continues with her reading of Salt-n-Pepa's song "Tramp." In their song, Salt-n-Pepa rap that most men are sexually promiscuous. They warn women to be wary of men who "undress them with their eyeballs" and who "always have sex on their mind" (p. 156). They label these men tramps who are not to be trusted. Women should avoid them at all costs, not even respond to a "Hi" (p. 156). Salt-n-Pepa do not praise men who engage in irresponsible, licentious sexual behavior. Instead they condemn them. Refiguring the image of tramp by connecting it to men rather than women, Salt-n-Pepa

interrupt the public discourse, challenging how women are typically constructed in rap by resisting the stereotypical objectification of women.

Rose also reads the video for the song which features Salt-n-Pepa in a nightclub attempting to expose dishonest men who are sexually promiscuous. The two women label these men "tramps." Salt-n-Pepa rap the song from a television screen over the bar, which Rose identifies as an apparent position of power. Unlike the usual situation, black women are not subject to the gaze of men. The television allows Salt-n-Pepa the ability to gaze at the tramps running game on women. Male tramps in the club cannot hide; they risk public exposure and censure. Both Salt-n-Pepa are dressed in sexually provocative clothes, a strategy they use to entice tramps so as to uncover the moves tramps use to trick women. But once baited and hooked, the men realize, through Salt-n-Pepa's dismissal of them, that they were not won over by the tramps' tired pick up lines. Through these humorous interactions, Salt-n-Pepa caution women about the heterosexual politics of the nightclub scene. Another scene in the video has an angry wife coming into the nightclub to bring her husband home, in a physical confrontation dragging him out of the nightclub. In one of the last scenes in the video, Salt-n-Pepa utilize the police tactic of taking mug shots in the processing of alleged lawbreakers. Each man goes before the camera, and the word "TRAMP" appears under his photograph. Salt-n-Pepa's policing of men's sexual behavior represents a significant break from the usual policing of women's sexual behavior in public discourses.

"Tramp" sends the message that women can successfully "play" (or outsmart) men at their own game. Salt-n-Pepa defeat the tramps, putting a stop to their trickery of women. Rose is careful to point out that women win, but only temporarily because even

though “Tramp” is resistant on some levels, it does not interrogate the power dynamics between men and women in heterosexual courtship practices. Women lose in the larger sense because the terms of the heterosexual dating game have not changed. Men still hold more power than women. Rose maintains that despite the difficulties women face in choosing to date men, the song does not seem to suggest that women abandon sexual relationships with men. Even though the song does not make space for queer possibilities, it still challenges some aspects of heterosexual dating. Rose summarizes the song’s contradictory modes of resistance:

> “Tramp” is courtship advice for women who choose to participate in the current configuration of heterosexual courtship, it does not offer an alternative paradigm for such courtship, and in some ways it works inside the very courtship rules that it highlights and criticizes. At best, “Tramp” is an implicit critique of the club scene as a setting for meeting potential mates as well as the institution of marriage that permits significant power imbalances clearly weighted in favor of men. (p. 158)

Salt-n-Pepa’s rap is an especially useful text to examine the complex ways in which women rappers represent black women playing with the rules of heterosexual courtship.

Rose continues with a reading of MC Lyte’s rap “Paper Thin.” Unlike Salt-n-Pepa, MC Lyte does not use humor in her video and lyrics. MC Lyte calls out Sam, a fictitious boyfriend, for his lying and cheating ways. Not fooled by his lies because they are paper thin, MC Lyte refuses to continue any kind of relationship with Sam. Rose calls “Paper Thin” a clever blend of “honest vulnerability” and “brutal cynicism” (p. 159):

> When you say you love me it doesn’t matter
> It goes into my head as just chit chatter
> You may think it’s egotistical or just very free
> But what you say, I take none of it seriously…
> I’m not the kind of girl to play a man out

They take the money and then they break the hell out.
No that's not my strategy, not the game I play
I admit I play a game, but it's not done that way.
Truly when I get involved I give it my heart
I mean my mind, my soul, my body, I mean every part.
But if it doesn't work out—yo it just doesn't.
It wasn't meant to be, you know it just wasn't.
So, I treat all of you like I treat all of them.
What you say to me is just paper thin. (p. 159)

MC Lyte expresses her determination to remain strong even though Sam hurts her. Resilient yet vulnerable, Lyte is still willing to take a chance on a relationship even if it does not last, and she is still ready to give all of herself—mind, soul, and body—to make it work. In an interesting inversion, Lyte represents "commitment, vulnerability, and sensitivity as assets, not indicators of female weakness" (p. 159). These qualities are the way she plays the game of heterosexual dating. She is honest about the game she plays.

In Rose's reading of the video version of "Paper Thin," she points out that MC Lyte centers herself in a very public place, the subway. When Lyte notices Sam trying to pick up two other women on the train, she confronts Sam, dismisses him from her life, and throws him off the subway. Sam no longer has access to the subway or to Lyte. She has taken control of her movement—literal and otherwise—away from Sam. Her movement on the train is suggestive of her power: "By setting her confrontation with Sam in the subway, in front of their peers, Lyte moves a private problem between lovers into the public arena and effectively dominates both spaces" (p. 160). Instead of allowing Sam's actions to stop her from moving on with her life, Lyte immediately chooses another potential love/sex interest.

In initiating the interaction, by pursuing what she desires, MC Lyte flips the script on heterosexual dating practices. She goes after the man she wants without hesitation

and without waiting for him to make the first move. She is open to another relationship, but this time she will take a more active role in making sure she is not a victim of another man's deceit. MC Lyte delineates new boundaries for her own dating practices. She raps:

> So, now I take precautions when choosing my mate
> I do not touch until the third or fourth date
> Then maybe we'll kiss on the fifth or sixth time that we meet
> Cause a date without a kiss is so incomplete
> And then maybe, I'll let you play with my feet
> You can suck the big toe and play with the middle
> It's so simple unlike a riddle. (p. 160)

No longer interested in a relationship with a dishonest man, Lyte says she will take her time when selecting a partner and dictate the time frame for sexual touching. She controls the pace of the relationship and the journey toward sexual consummation. Realizing her own erotic power (Lorde, 1984), Lyte intends to withhold sex, but she is not willing to sacrifice it altogether. She does not want an "incomplete" sexual experience. She becomes a more active participant in the sexual act telling her new man when he is allowed to touch her and what body parts he should touch to stimulate her sexually. Lyte is bold in defining the conditions that will make her happy in the relationship.

Rose maintains that both "Tramps" and "Paper Thin" are "explicitly dialogic texts that draw on the language and terms imbedded in long-standing struggles over the parameters of heterosexual courtship" (p. 161). They are part of an "ongoing historical conversation" (p. 161) in the larger discourse in black popular music about black heterosexual relationships. Rose points out that Salt-n-Pepa's "Tramp" has roots in a 1967 soul song by Otis Redding and Carla Thomas, and she discusses two similarities

both songs share. First, Salt-n-Pepa's version samples parts of the musical arrangement of the earlier song. Second, like Thomas who sings about her dissatisfaction with Redding's mistakes in the relationship, Salt-n-Pepa rap about the difficulties of heterosexual partnerships. Salt-n-Pepa pick up Thomas' theme, and they comment on similar heterosexual struggles with contemporary examples of dishonest men. Rose explains how the two songs are in conversation with each other: "Salt-n-Pepa are testifying to Carla's problems via the music, at the same time providing their contemporary audience with a collective reference to black musical predecessors and the history of black female heterosexual struggles" (p. 161).

MC Lyte is also in conversation with the fictitious Sam, who can be considered representative of men in relationships who cheat. In her dismissal of Sam, Lyte shows women what to say and what to do when they are involved in similar situations. That she is confident, outspoken, and unwavering suggests to women to define the terms of their own heterosexual relationships. Rose explains the overall dialogic effect of Lyte's song: "[Lyte's] game, her strategy, have a critical sexual difference that lays the groundwork for a black female-centered communal voice that revises and expands the terms of female power in heterosexual courtship" (p. 161).

Rose goes on to briefly summarize songs by other women rappers that are also in dialogue with songs by Salt-n-Pepa and MC Lyte. Women rappers such as Oaktown 3-5-7, Monie Love, and Ice Cream Tee challenge men's mistreatment of women and tell women to leave abusive men. By providing tales of assertive, outspoken women who ain't taking no shit from men, these women rappers offer advice and encouragement for women who struggle in heterosexual relationships.

Rose suggests that these women rappers' confrontational communication "can be subverted and its power diminished" when it is "contained or renamed as the female complaint" (p. 162). Building on the work of feminist cultural critic Lauren Berlant (1988), Rose maintains that women rappers' resistive speech is often reduced to the labels "bitching" and "complaining" by male rappers to repress black women rappers' legitimate critiques (p. 162). Black women rappers' responses to male supremacy in the rap industry are not challenged on their merits. Rarely do male rappers offer serious arguments to counter women's critiques. To reduce the empowering potential, women rappers' texts must be constructed as women's over-emotional, out-of-control ranting and raving. According to Rose,

> Berlant warns that the 'female complaint…as a mode of expression is an admission and recognition both of privilege and powerlessness…circumscribed by a knowledge of woman's inevitable delegitimation within the patriarchal public sphere.' Berlant argues that resistance to sexual oppression must take place 'in the patriarchal public sphere, the place where significant or momentous exchanges of power are perceived to take place,' but that the female complaint is devalued, marginalized, and ineffective in this sphere. (p. 162)

Rose pays particular attention to Berlant's analysis (1988) of "Roxanne's Revenge," an answer rap by early woman rapper Roxanne Shanté. Berlant concludes that male rappers tried to control and discredit Roxanne on a compilation album with several other answer raps. The male voices on the compilation album serve to enclose—and perhaps drown out—Roxanne's voice so as to render her assertive, woman-centered response meaningless. The song became susceptible to "hystericization by a readily available phallic discourse [which] is immanent in the very genre of her expression" (Berlant quoted in Rose, p. 162). Rose supports Berlant's argument about the routine marginalization and silencing of black women's voices in public discourses. Rose agrees

that for a long time, black women's persuasive, forceful responses have been trivialized as "hysterical and irrational or whiny and childlike" (p. 162). Rose warns against conflating the false charges of complaint with the actual voices themselves because connecting the two typically draws more attention to the efforts to suppress women than on women's modes of resistance.

Instead, Rose focuses her attention on the importance of "Roxanne's Revenge" to women rappers' presence in the public discourse of rap. Written from the viewpoint of a hip hop generation black woman, "Roxanne's Revenge" changed the conversation started by UTFO's original rap "Roxanne Roxanne" in 1985. Roxanne Shanté's response to "Roxanne Roxanne," a rap that depended on negative representations of black women, was extremely popular at the time. Because Shanté was a skillful emcee who answered the negative stereotypes with rhymes that dissed men and celebrated women, she effectively disrupted the male-driven conversation among rappers. She earned her props from female and male fans alike. In a comparison between the two raps, Rose places more value on Shanté's rap; she says, "Much of the status of the original UTFO song "Roxanne Roxanne" is a result of the power of Roxanne Shanté's answer record" (p. 163). She goes even further to say that Shanté's rap, more than UTFO's original song or any of the male responses on the compilation record, has remained important and influential to the discourse of hip hop until today. It still serves as an exemplar of young women rappers' bold, convincing, woman-centered public challenges to the demeaning representations of black women as a result of male supremacy in the rap industry. Even though Rose believes some male rappers tried to diminish the strength of Shanté's voice on a compilation record with their voices, she says their effort at containment failed. She

warns that this kind of attempt at discrediting and even silencing women's voices will continue, but she hopes for "substantial female public sphere presence and contestation" (p. 163). She describes the kind of public challenges that are necessary: "These public sphere contests must involve more than responses to sexist male speech; they must also entail the development of sustained, strong female voices that stake claim to public space generally" (p. 163).

Preeminent Emcees: Who's the Boss?

Rose delineates the qualities of a skillful rapper, which include verbal mastery, mastery of delivery, creativity, personal style, and virtuosity. Successful rappers—both men and women—carve out a public space for themselves by "moving the crowd" (p. 163), an emcee's ability to win the audience's attention and respect on the microphone. Of course, successful rappers' lyrics must reflect the appearance of total self-confidence, unwavering fearlessness, and absolute power. A rapper's identity on stage is rooted in her/his ability to out rhyme the competition. So when women rappers "seize the public stage and win the crowd's admiration under these highly competitive conditions," they represent a "substantial intervention in contemporary women's performance and popular cultural identities" (p. 163). Rose points out that Queen Latifah is one such example.

Rose focuses on Queen Latifah's lyrics and video for "Ladies First" as an example of a strong black woman-centered public voice. Rose describes the rap's significance:

> Taken together, the video and lyrics for "Ladies First" are a statement for black female unity, independence, and power, as well as an anticolonial statement concerning Africa's southern region and recognition of the importance of black female political activists, which offers hope for the development of a pro-female pro-black diasporic political consciousness. (p. 164)

Queen Latifah's rap featuring Monie Love, a black British woman rapper, opens with a declaration of Latifah's strength as a rapper and the strength of black women in general. According to Latifah, women have many powers. She raps:

> The ladies will kick it, the rhyme it is wicked
> Those who don't know how to be pros get evicted
> A woman can bear you, break you, take you
> Now it's time to rhyme, can you relate to
> A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream? (p. 164)

Monie Love picks up on Latifah's themes. Refusing to be silenced for any longer, Monie Love addresses those who "have no clue" to reveal that the skills of women emcees are incomparable. She raps:

> Eh, Yo! Let me take it from here Queen.
> Excuse me but I think I am about due
> To get into precisely what I am about to do
> I'm conversatin' to the folks who have no whatsoever clue
> So, listen very carefully as I break it down to you
> Merrily merrily, hyper happy overjoyed,
> Pleased with all the beats and rhymes my sisters have employed
> Slick and smooth—throwing down the sound totally, a yes.
> Let me state the position: Ladies First, Yes? (p. 164)

The two women create a communal space to boast about women's superior positioning. In call-and-response fashion, the two converse with each other as they celebrate women's strength. Their microphone time reflects a shared purpose and a cooperative spirit, rather than an edgy competitiveness and angry aggressiveness often seen in male rappers' exchanges. Their rap is an anthem for the empowerment of women: Ladies First, Ladies First.

In her reading of the video for "Ladies First," Rose explains the video's significance. Calling the video both Black Nationalist and black woman-centered, Rose discusses its focus on black women's active participation in liberation struggles across

the black Diaspora. The video begins with still photos of Sojourner Truth, Angela Davis, and Winnie Mandela. Later, the video highlights news footage of mass demonstrations led by blacks and police violence against black protestors around the globe. Included in this montage is footage of large crowds of rural African women and men in protest against apartheid. Monie Love and Queen Latifah rap against this backdrop of black women activists. Immediately, Queen Latifah situates herself in a long history of black women who have carved out spaces in public discourses to resist oppression of all kinds. Latifah explains her purpose for the video:

> I wanted to show the strength of black women in history. Strong black women. Those were good examples. I wanted to show what we've done. We've done a lot, it's just that people don't know it. Sisters have been in the midst of these things for a long time, but we just don't get to see it that much. (p. 165)

Playing a military commander in the video, Queen Latifah takes charge of charting a new course of history for South Africa. In one of the most important scenes in the video, Latifah surveys an oversized map of Southern Africa, on which chess-like figurines of white men carrying briefcases sit. In a move suggestive of her dissatisfaction with the current distribution of power in the region, Latifah upsets the norm when she chooses figures of black fists, suggestive of the 1970s Black Power Movement, to place over previously white-controlled countries. In effect, Latifah resurrects and reinstates black power by discarding white authority—perhaps white capitalists (with briefcases). Not until she purges the white regime from the map does Latifah seem satisfied. Queen Latifah's reign (over South Africa) is nationalist and black woman-centered: "The powerful, level-headed, and black feminist character of her lyrics calls into question the historically cozy relationship between nationalism and patriarchy" (p. 165).

Next, Rose explains how "Ladies First" is dialogic. She points out that Latifah samples the widely known Malcolm X phrase, "There are going to be some changes here," throughout the rap. In the video, Latifah places the phrase alongside images of some popular women rappers and DJs of the time including Ms. Melodie, Ice Cream Tee, and Shelley Thunder. She also uses the phrase as a sound backdrop accompanying the South African protest footage. Rose summarizes the impact of the juxtaposition between Malcolm's voice and the images of black women and the protests in South Africa:

> Latifah calls on Malcolm as a part of a collective African-American historical memory and recontextualizes him not only as a voice in support of contemporary struggles in South Africa but also as a voice in support of the imminent changes regarding the degraded status of black women and specifically black women rappers. (p. 166)

I also consider "Ladies First" to be dialogic because Latifah (re)writes the representation of black women's participation in the black protest tradition. Historically, representations of black protest movements, especially those during the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, feature black men as leaders and black women in secondary positions. Traditionally, representations have communicated that black men lead and black women follow. Black women's participation is deemed not as important as men's. For example, Ella Baker, Winnie Mandela, and Elaine Brown are often represented as less significant than their male counterparts Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and H. Rap Brown. Latifah critiques this (his)tory by centering black women's active participatory and leadership roles in black liberation struggles. Not only does she include the oft-used images of black women leaders like Angela Davis and Winnie Mandela in her video, but she also incorporates images of everyday rural African women protestors in South Africa. Including these multiple images, Latifah

problematizes the automatic connection between protest and black middle-class women, and she calls into question the history that represents black women as inferior players in black protest traditions.

Express Yourself: Black Women's Bodies in the Public Sphere

Rose focuses on black women rappers' expressions of physical and sexual independence, and she begins with a discussion of the lyrics and video for Salt-n-Pepa and E.U.'s rap duet "Shake Your Thang." In the rap, Salt-n-Pepa proclaim their freedom to shake their asses; they feel no inhibition about expressing themselves sexually: "It's my thang and I'll swing it the way that I feel, with a little seduction and some sex appeal" (p. 166). In the video for "Shake Your Thang," Salt-n-Pepa are arrested for their public "dirty" dancing. Their public displays of sexuality are contained when Salt-n-Pepa are brought to a police station. This environment serves as the main backdrop for the video.

The video's scenes inside the police station begin with Salt-n-Pepa blowing kisses to the person taking their mug-shot photographs. When the police ask both women, "What we gonna do about this dirty dancing?" Pepa responds, "We gonna do what we wanna do" (p. 166). They remain steadfast about their commitment to sexually provocative dancing. Outside the police station are groups of protestors leading a "Free Salt-n-Pepa" campaign; they demand that the women be released. The police station scenes are juxtaposed with various scenes in which Salt-n-Pepa and other men and women dance together in large open public spaces. Eventually, Salt-n-Pepa are released from jail because they have not broken the law. The police cannot contain them with the (false) charges any longer. Defiant as they leave the police station, Salt-n-Pepa tell the police, "I told you so" (p. 167). Salt-n-Pepa refuse to be uptight about expressing

themselves sexually, and in the end, they win. Rose explains the overall impact of the video:

> The police raid and arrests make explicit the real, informal yet institutionally based policing of female sexual expression. The video speaks to black women, calls for open, public displays of female expression, assumes a community-based support for their freedom, and focuses directly on the sexual desirability and beauty of black women's bodies. (p. 167)

The video is playful and comedic, yet it still manages to communicate Salt-n-Pepa's resistance to restrictions and moral codes against women's public displays of sexuality. Ultimately, the women can go on shaking their thangs whenever and wherever they choose. Salt-n-Pepa's video and its representation of black women's sexuality are important, especially when it is understood in relation to other discourses that have objectified black women's bodies and silenced black women's expressions of sexuality.

Rose situates Salt-n-Pepa's emphasis on the black woman's butt in their expression of black women's physical and sexual freedom within a discussion of the larger historical discourse of white obsession with black women's bodies. She maintains that the black behind has "an especially charged place in the history of both black sexual expression and white classification of it as a sign of sexual perversity and inferiority" (p. 167). Rose mentions the naked exhibition of Sara Bartmann who was paraded around as a sexual freak, "The Hottentot Venus," in Britain and France in the early 1800s and the exoticization of Josephine Baker's nearly naked body in her performances for mostly white (European) audiences. Salt-n-Pepa's "Shake Your Thang" joins a contemporary conversation in popular music that celebrates the black butt, dances like "The Bump" and "The Dookey Butt," and songs like E.U.'s "Da Butt" and most recently Beyoncé's

"Bootylicious." Rose quotes bell hooks' (1992) comments on the re-coding of the black butt in popular music:

> Contemporary popular music is one of the primary cultural locations for discussions of black sexuality. In song lyrics, the butt is talked about in ways that attempt to challenge racist assumptions that suggest it is an ugly sign of inferiority, even as it remains a sexualized sign. (hooks quoted in Rose, p. 168)

The value that black music gives to the fuller and rounder black butt is reflective of black standards of beauty centered on thick, substantial hips, thighs, and butts. Songs that celebrate black women's body types as sexually attractive represents a challenge to a mainstream beauty aesthetic that privileges long and lean rather than round and full. Therefore, Rose concludes, "Salt-n-Pepa's rap and video become an inversion of the aesthetic hierarchy that renders black women's bodies inadequate and sexually unattractive" (p. 168).

Drawing so much attention to black women's asses is a risky move by Salt-n-Pepa, given the larger rap context in which black women's bodies are routinely objectified. Rose points out that women rappers' sexual explicitness and sexual freedom are sometimes misinterpreted as "self-inflicted exploitation," most often by white feminist critics who give "surprisingly cautious responses…regarding the importance of women rappers, particularly in their use of sexually overt gestures and lyrics" (p. 168). Rose turns to black feminist Hortense Spillers (1989) to challenge the misinformed readings of women's rappers' texts, particularly her discussion of the impact of the history of silence on representations of black women's sexuality. Rose summarizes Spillers' claim: "Spillers argues that this silence has at least two faces; either black

women are creatures of male sexual possession, or they are reified into the status of nonbeing. Room for self-defined sexual identity exists in neither alternative" (p. 168).

When understood within a historical framework that connects black women's sexuality and silence, black women rappers' sexual narratives that feature black women speaking openly about sexual desire, owning their bodies, and celebrating their desirability cannot be (mis)read as "self-inflicted exploitation" (p. 168). They are significant representations in the public discourse about black women's sexuality, and they are even more important narratives in the discourse of rap in which black women are consistently constructed as objects to be displayed, possessed, and penetrated by men.

According to Rose, black women's body parts, particularly black women's asses, have increasingly been portrayed, mostly in male rappers' videos, as "the primary target for male predatory sexual behavior" (p. 169). Rose says that some of these videos present "an exaggerated mode of real-life visual and verbal tracking and stalking of women's behinds" (p. 169). Rose points to Wrecks-in-Effex's "Rump Shaker" and 2 Live Crew's "Pop That Coochie" as two such examples. The videos for both raps sever women's asses from the rest of their bodies, so women's asses become almost the only other content in the video, besides the male rappers performing the song. Sir Mix-a-Lot creates similar representations in "Baby Got Back," but his rap is more complex. Rejecting a beauty aesthetic that privileges thinness, Sir Mix-a-Lot articulates desire for a black woman with much butt. He is not at all interested in skinny white women (with little to no ass) who are often on the covers of fashion magazines. They are not sexually attractive to him. Rose explains the contradictory effects of "Baby Got Back":

> [Sir Mix-a-Lot's] voicing of a familiar black male vernacular sentiment that affirms black women's bodies in a cultural environment in which they are aesthetically rejected may bring a sigh of relief to many women, but unfortunately it contributes to an already entrenched understanding of women's bodies as objects of consumption. (p. 169)

When Salt-n-Pepa proclaim their freedom to shake their butts, they participate in a complicated conversation about—perhaps battle over—the representations of black women's sexual identities. Their terrain is contested space, a cacophony of voices, each with something important to contribute.

Not all black women who participate in rap enjoy the same level of creative control in the construction of black women's images. Rose blames some black women for being complicit in their own exploitation in the rap industry, specifically women who perform in derogatory videos and act as objects on display at marketing events for men's rap albums. Labeled "video hos," "hotties," and "skeezers" (p. 169) these women are chosen for their visual appeal. In fact, Rose mentions that a male record producer she interviewed admitted to keeping a "hottie file" (p. 169) with all the essential data about many women's physical features so that he could locate exactly what he needed quickly. He never had a shortage problem, and he selected women solely on what his male rap artists found visually desirable. Rose compares this "video meat market" to the "rock/sports/film star groupie phenomenon" (p. 169) in which women fans feel important because of their (sexual) association—albeit brief and meaningless—with rich and famous male stars. Even though women choose to participate in the video meat market, they are viewed as a commodity, a piece of property, something to be exchanged among men and valuable only if men say so. The kind of participation in rap that these women choose is complicated, and women rappers have to earn respect as serious emcees in the

same setting that produces video hos. Rose explains women rappers' reaction to the video meat market:

> Women rappers who have commented on these dynamics at conferences and in rap lyrics are not calling for the patriarchal protection of women (the familiar flipside of the meat market); instead, they seem to be acknowledging that under these conditions, where male rappers and record executives have virtually all the social and institutional power, women cannot engage in this sort of display and sexual exchange in an empowering way. (p. 170)

Women rappers work in a hostile environment. They have to prove that they are legitimate emcees with something worth saying that will move the crowd.

Rose stresses that the historical context of silence[6] surrounding issues of black women's sexuality and the rap context of sexual objectification are necessary pieces of the complex dialogue affecting how black women rappers choose to represent black women. Many black women rappers problematize issues of black women's sexuality, mainstream beauty standards, and the roles of women in heterosexual relationships. Their performances are calls for the open expression of black women's sexual desire and physical and financial independence. Their stories are about women in charge of their lives and confident about who they are. In addition to being mostly woman-centered and communal, the representations black women rappers construct are also working-class. Rose explains:

> Through their lyrics and video images, [black women rappers] form a dialogue with working-class black women and men, offering young black women a small but potent culturally reflexive public space. Black women rappers sport distinctively black hairstyles and hip hop clothing and jewelry that ground them in a contemporary working-class black youth aesthetic. They affirm black female

[6] According to Hine (1989), a "politics of silence" arose among black women in the years following enslavement (p. 912). To defend against pervasive charges of immorality and sexual promiscuity, black women, especially those of the middle-class in the black women's club movement, "reconstructed and represented their sexuality through its absence—through silence, secrecy, and invisibility" (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 266).

> working-class cultural signs and experiences that are rarely depicted in American popular culture. (p. 170)

In this public space, women rappers resist silence and sexual objectification, and in so doing, challenge male supremacy.

According to Rose, women rappers' challenges to male supremacy are about sex, sexuality, and control of black women's bodies. Women rappers' sexual narratives connect their power and independence to sexuality, and male rappers' sexist narratives often link their power to domination over black women's sexuality. Rose analyzes the possible reasons for the hostility and fear some male rappers express toward women. First, changes in attitudes regarding the institution of marriage have affected the ways in which masculinity is constructed. Rose explains how mainstream society's tendency to link masculinity with a man's ability to provide resources for his family places black men at a disadvantage. Black men face a more restrictive job market than white men because of racism, so they are more likely to be unemployed or stuck in jobs that do not pay well. If black men cannot provide financial stability to their families, the marker of true masculinity according to mainstream standards, then they are not real men. Second, marriage is not necessarily as valuable to many women as in the past. Marriage is not the only means by which many women can attain financial security, and many women can afford to leave a marriage that is not working in their best interests. Rose quotes black male cultural critic Robin Kelley (1996) on the effects of these changes on the construction of masculinity by gangsta rappers in their sexual narratives. He says, "'Bringing home the bacon' is no longer a measure of manhood; instead, heterosexual conquest free of commitment is prized much more than marriage, which in some cases is

even viewed as emasculating (Kelley quoted in Rose, p. 171). Increasingly, black men's ability to "play" women, rather than marry them, is the sign of real manhood. In other words, manhood is determined by how many women sexual partners a man can manage (or "play") without significant financial contribution to their households and without the women finding out that he is not faithful. Marriage is obsolete (and perhaps has been since enslavement) in defining hip hop generation black manhood.

The second reason Rose mentions for some male rappers' expression of resentment toward women is "the specter of black female sexual power" (p. 171). She points to an interview with male rapper Ice Cube who explains one reason for men's hostility toward women. According to Ice Cube, heterosexual men feel controlled by women because they need women for the consummation of sexual desire. Men fear women's power in the heterosexual struggle. Of course, Ice Cube does not comment on the role patriarchy plays in the construction of heterosexual male desire as "aggressive, predatory, and consuming," but he and other male rappers "expose the vulnerability of heterosexual male desire in their exaggerated stories of total domination over women" (p. 172). In his rap "The Bomb," Ice Cube cautions men against being overly enticed by a woman's big butt, and in their song "Poison," Bel Biv Devoe warn men never to trust a woman with a big butt and a smile. Both songs send the message that intense sexual desire for a woman can lead to a man's destruction.

Male rappers' exaggerations are countered with women rappers' own tales of strong, independent, sexually alive women who use their power in heterosexual relationships in ways that benefit themselves. Rose says she is careful not to suggest that women rappers have so much power as to ultimately lead to the breakdown of patriarchy,

but women rappers do have some power to redefine the public conversation about the representations of black women's sexuality and control over black women's bodies. A common practice of male rappers is to justify their promiscuity by blaming promiscuous women who offer sex in exchange for material possessions. They label these women "skeezers," and they become the sign for licentiousness. Rose explains how women rappers are able to change the debate:

> Black women rappers do not deny their sexual experiences by pretending to be virginal counterparts to these "skeezers." Female rappers distinguish themselves as seasoned women with sexual confidence and financial independence who are tired of dishonest men who themselves seek sex from women (much like the women who seek money from men). (p. 174)

Black women rappers could easily choose to define themselves against the "skeezers"; instead they choose to focus on sexually loose, gold-digging, dependent men. They shift the conversation among rappers that originally objectified women toward an emphasis on men's promiscuity and dishonesty.

A few women rappers, whom Rose identifies as "gangsta women" or "gangsta bitches," choose "an aggressive and violent fantasy form similar to that of men's gangsta raps" (p. 174). In "Recipe of a Ho," Boss, who "takes great pride in knocking niggas off," says that promiscuous men are worthless to her because they have slept with too many women, and she questions their manhood by calling them "wanna-be-pimps who can't get any women to go to bed with them at all" (p. 174). Boss describes a violent confrontation she has with a man who wants to have sex with her in her rap "a blind date with boss." After this man asks his male friend for a condom and describes how "hard" he intends to "fuck" her, Boss answers by demanding money and shooting them four

times. Drawing on the work of cultural critic dream hampton, Rose comments on the significance of black women rappers' fantasy narratives:

> These revenge fantasies against black men are as socially relevant as black men's revenge fantasies against the police. As dream hampton writes, "Young black women die at the hands of Black men who may or may not have claimed to love them, more often than they die at the hands of white men, police or otherwise." (p. 174)

So when women rappers present tales in which they are the violent aggressors, they flip the script on black men's abuse of black women. Even if only on wax, black women fight back. The sexual narratives women rappers construct are important to the public discourse about issues of black sexuality.

Rose ends this section by including an excerpt from an interview with Salt of the women rap duo Salt-n-Pepa and lyrics from "Music and Politics" by the male rap group Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy. Salt talks about her personal struggle to participate in a heterosexual relationship and maintain a sense of independence. She says:

> I just want to depend on myself. I feel like a relationship shouldn't be emotional dependence. I, myself, am more comfortable when I do not depend on hugs and kisses from somebody that I possibly won't get. If I don't get them then I'll be disappointed. So if I get them, I'll appreciate them. (p. 175)

Salt's beliefs are reflected in Salt-n-Pepa's raps about the need for black women's autonomy and resistance to control over black women's bodies. Male rapper Michael Franti of the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy connects personal sexual liberation and transformation to social and cultural revolution.

> If ever I would stop thinking about music and politics…
> I would tell you that sometimes I use sex to avoid communication
> It's the best escape when we're down on our luck
> But I can express more emotions than laughter, anger and let's fuck…
> I would tell you that the personal revolution is far more difficult
> And is the first step in any revolution. (p. 175)

Rose offers these comments to illustrate how young black women and men rappers negotiate the expression of complicated sexual realities of the hip hop generation.

When and Where I Enter: White Feminism and Black Women Rappers

Rose explains black women rappers' resistance to being labeled "feminist" even though critics have constructed them as "feminist voices in rap" (p. 176). Rose's interviews with Salt, MC Lyte, and Queen Latifah reveal that their resistance can be attributed to two related issues. First, all three women rappers define feminism as a movement for white women, and second, they equate feminism with being anti-male. As black women, they do not feel loyalty to a movement that champions causes significant to mostly white, educated, middle-class women's lives, and they do not want their critiques of sexist male behavior to be mistaken for an anti-black male stance.

Rose offers excerpts of interviews with three black women rappers who express their hesitancy with the feminist label. Initially, MC Lyte said that she did not consider herself feminist. She asked Rose for her own working definition of feminist, and MC Lyte agreed with the description. Rose includes the definition she offered to MC Lyte:

> I would say that a feminist believed that there was sexism in society, wanted to change and worked toward change. Either wrote, spoke, or behaved in a way that was pro-woman, in that she supported situations (organizations) that were trying to better the lives of women. A feminist feels that women are more disadvantaged than men in many situations and would want to stop that kind of inequality. (p. 176)

Rose points out that when MC Lyte was able to construct feminism as "a mode of analysis" rather than as "a label for a group of women associated with a particular social movement" (p. 146), she could then talk about black women's autonomy more comfortably. MC Lyte discusses with Rose her own sense of independence, the need for

both women and men to be independent, and the realization that black women and men need each other. MC Lyte's resistance to feminism stems from its association with white women's movements, not from a resistance to women's independence. Rose ascribes this association to public attacks from conservative, right-wing organizations and the mainstream media's depiction of the feminist movement as angry bra-burning white women. Represented in this way, the feminist movement has little resonance for working-class women of color. Rose names race as another significant cause for black women rappers' resistance to feminism. Understanding the necessity of shared struggle against racism, black women rappers do not want to be perceived as being in direct opposition to black men.

Queen Latifah chooses to call herself pro-woman instead of feminist. Latifah could not tell Rose why the label feminist did not work for her, but she did say that she supported some feminist issues. She expressed support for the pro-choice movement in particular, and she told Rose that she admired Faye Wattleton, the former president of Planned Parenthood. Rose says that Salt of the rap duo Salt-n-Pepa accepts the feminist label to describe herself, but Salt clarifies her position:

> I guess you could say that [I'm a feminist] in a way. Not in a strong sense where I'd want to go to war or anything like that. [laughter]…But I preach a lot about women depending on men for everything, for their mental stability, for their financial status, for their happiness. Women have brains, and I hate to see them walking in the shadow of a man. (p. 177)

The refusal of some women rappers to label themselves feminist because of its association with a white women's movement and because of their race loyalty to black men is not unlike the criticisms that black feminist theorists make about feminism. Rose points to black feminist theory by bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Wall, and Kimberlé

Crenshaw that conceptualizes race and gender as interlocking oppressions and critiques the marginalization of black women in the mainstream feminist movement to support her claim that "the realities of racism link black women to black men in a way that challenges cross-racial sisterhood" (p. 177). Drawing on these black feminists' work, particularly Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989) that problematizes the "single-axis framework" common to feminist theory, Rose explains the foundation for some black women rappers' rejection of feminism. Crenshaw notes a tendency in white feminist theory to construct race and gender along separate axes which places black women in an untenable position of privileging one identity marker over another. Rose quotes Crenshaw's critique of white feminist theory:

> The value of white feminist theory to Black women is diminished because it evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged. Not only are women of color in fact overlooked, but their exclusion is reinforced when *white* women speak for us as *women*. The authoritative universal voice—usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity—is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics…Feminists thus ignore how their own race functions to mitigate some aspects of sexism and moreover, how it often privileges them over and contributes to the domination of other women. (emphasis in original, Crenshaw quoted in Rose, p. 181)

Crenshaw's critique is theoretical support for some black women rappers' reluctance toward feminism, and it shows that black women rappers cannot be easily labeled "feminist voices in rap" in totalizing opposition to male rappers. Black women rappers' positioning in the rap industry is much more complicated in that black women rappers critique black male sexist behavior and support black men at the same time. Black women rappers' songs have to resonate with both young female and male fans if they are to remain successful in the rap game. Black women rappers have to maintain

working relationships with male rappers, some whose songs contain demeaning representations of black women, so that a dialogue between the sexes can continue in the discourse of rap. A single-axis framework cannot account for all of the tensions black women rappers must negotiate so that they can craft songs that tell black women's stories.

Conclusion

Rose concludes with the same call that Angela Davis (1990) and Hazel Carby (1986) issue to scholars interested in examining representations of black women. Davis' work is a call to pay attention to black women performers' representations of working-class black female life. According to Davis, to understand black working-class women of the 1920s, look to the songs blues women performed during that time. Davis explains:

> Music has long permeated the daily life of most African-Americans; it has played a central role in the normal socialization process; and during moments characterized by intense movements for social change, it has helped to shape the necessary political consciousness. Any attempt, therefore, to understand in depth the evolution of women's consciousness within the Black community requires a serious examination of the music which has influenced them—particularly that which they themselves have created. (Davis quoted in Rose, p. 153)

Hazel Carby also calls for an examination of black women's blues, a move away from the tendency to focus scholarly attention on black women's literature when studying representations of black women's identities, especially black women's sexual identities. According to Carby, women critics have chosen to focus on black women's literature to define black women's consciousness. Because "different cultural forms negotiate and resolve different sets of social contradictions" (Carby quoted in Rose, p. 153), the representations of black women's sexualities created by black women blues singers are quite different from those created by black women writers. However different, all

cultural forms created by black women including their musical productions are significant in examining representations of black women's identities.

Like Davis and Carby, Rose stresses the importance of women's popular music as a site for the expression of black women's identities. Her critical analysis is centered on how black women rappers write and perform lyrics that resonate with hip hop generation working-class black women and that challenge representations of black women in other public discourses. Rose summarizes the impact of women rappers' public presence:

> Black women rappers have effectively changed the interpretive framework for the work of male rappers and have contested public sphere discourses, particularly those pertaining to race and gender. As women who challenge sexism expressed by male rappers, yet sustain dialogue with them, who reject the racially coded aesthetic hierarchies in American popular culture by privileging black female bodies, and who support black women's voices and history, black female rappers constitute an important and resistive voice in rap and contemporary black women's cultural production in general. (p. 182)

My work takes up these women theorists' call to study the music of black women performers of my generation. I respond to their challenge to examine the music of black women rappers so as to understand the complicated ways they choose to represent hip hop generation black women in their songs.

CHAPTER FIVE
ROLL CALL: INTRODUCING THE WOMEN MCs…

Introduction

The black women rappers whose texts I choose to analyze include Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott, Eve, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, Trina, Mia X, Da Brat, and Queen Pen. I choose these black women rappers in particular among contemporary women emcees because they construct stories that are familiar to me and prompt me to re-think my own black woman struggles with self-love, self-definition, and self-sufficiency. All of their real life stories and the ones they tell on wax are interesting, layered in meaning, and pedagogical. They teach me something about myself in relation to a larger community of young black women who write texts that enrich and complicate the public conversation about black women's experiences. Some of their stories present problematic representations of black women; some tell tales of strong, independent, sexually alive black women; some resonate with my own personal struggles as a black working-class heterosexual woman educator in white male-dominated academe; some are funny; some tackle serious social problems; and some seem to be in conversation with historical and contemporary discourses that misrepresent black women.

I use this chapter to provide biographical context for Missy, Eve, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina who play more significant roles in the dissertation than Mia X, Da Brat, and Queen Pen. The lives of Missy, Eve, Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina are as interesting and complex and contradictory as the texts they write and perform. Surprising yet familiar, unique yet common, and sad yet hopeful, their stories tell of young black women who are in a constant struggle to survive and achieve success in an often hostile

environment. What these women rappers share about their lives, past and present, resonates with my own life story and the lives of countless other black women in the United States. I have collected a series of biographical details from several sources about each of the five women rappers. In addition to retrieving information about each woman rapper from her record label's official Internet website, I have relied on several mainstream publications for information including the hip hop magazines The Source, XXL, and Vibe; mainstream music magazines Rolling Stone and Billboard; and mainstream news, lifestyle, and women's magazines Newsweek, Ebony, The New Yorker, Ms., and Essence. I have also used two non-mainstream publications about hip hop culture entitled Blu and Doula. I have collected and read numerous articles about women rappers from these publications that span the last seven years. What women rappers say about themselves and what the authors of the articles say about them provide me with additional texts to examine. These texts serve a dual purpose in the pages that follow. I use them to introduce the women rappers whose texts I analyze in Chapters 6 and 7, and I use them to continue discussion of the overall themes of the dissertation, specifically power, representation, and pedagogy.

I select the five women I feature in this chapter on biographical context for multiple reasons. I choose Missy because she is the most powerful woman rapper/writer/producer in the rap game today, she resists a male-defined beauty aesthetic with innovative images of black women, and she has been the most vocal about reclaiming the label bitch from an oppressive male rap discourse. I choose Eve because she has been the most self-reflexive in mainstream magazine articles about her public pedagogical role. Alongside her commitment to songs that teach is a gender-specific

focus on women's issues. Proving herself a legitimate emcee in the male-dominated rap industry, writing her own songs, and telling stories that focus on women's particular struggles—each of these themes is important to Eve's public pedagogy. I choose Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina, whom I collectively call the "bad girls," because their hypermaterialistic and hypersexual representations unsettle outdated Victorian notions about the public expression of women's sexualities. The bad girls' texts teach me the most about the importance of not passing judgment on women rappers' texts and keeping an open mind to representations that reveal a range of black women's sexual expressions.

I do not wish to tell each woman rapper's life story to date in a seamless narrative that begins at her birth and progresses forward into the present. Instead of writing linear tales, I deliberately choose I-We narratives to reveal our individual and collective experiences as black women living in the United States. For each woman rapper's story, I begin with biographical details and then I address issues that emerged from the magazine articles about each woman rapper in her roles as businesswoman, performer, writer, artist, and cultural icon. To explain these issues and to support my claims about each woman rapper, I include a number of excerpts from what they are quoted as saying about themselves in the articles. In (re)telling the stories of the five women rappers featured in this chapter, I am most interested in offering biographical details that resonate with my own personal struggles as well as those that black women face collectively. Black women rappers' stories reveal experiences familiar to many black women: our struggle to define ourselves rather than be mis(represented) by others, our struggle for respect and treatment as peers in male-dominated work spaces, our struggle to express

our sexual selves, our struggle against violence by male partners in heterosexual relationships, and our struggle to build community and mobilize ourselves.

I organize my discussion of these struggles as they relate to all five women rappers by connecting them to larger themes of power, representation, and pedagogy. These themes emerged from my review of women rappers' quoted comments about their experiences performing songs, constructing images, writing stories for women, and earning respect in the male-controlled space of rap. Over and over again in mainstream magazine articles, women rappers discuss gender-based power imbalances and the stereotypical imaging of black women in the rap industry. They also talk about their positioning as role models and their pedagogical responsibility to young fans. Women rappers' comments raise questions about larger issues of power, representation, and pedagogy, and each one of these larger issues is especially significant in contextualizing representations of black women written by black women.

Power, representation, and pedagogy are also important themes in my story as a black woman teacher/student/writer working in a predominantly white university. In the following pages, I share some of my experiences in these various roles as they relate to women rappers' stories about power, representation, and pedagogy. For example, in the sections on power and pedagogy, I discuss my experiences in schooling spaces responsible for the continued disenfranchisement of poor black children and the marginalization of black women scholars' writing. I also discuss several lessons I have learned from women rappers' texts. Readers will notice that my story is mostly absent in each of the sections on representation. I do not weave personal narratives into the representation sections like I do in the power and pedagogy sections. Perhaps I am using

rhetorical distance because the representations created by Missy, Eve, and the Bad Girls are so different from who I am/represent myself to be. These women often make bold assertions, wear outrageous clothes, boast about their skills, play with stereotypes, flaunt their (material) assets, and take risks. These representational acts are provocative, but I do not make similar choices when representing myself to others. Even though I do not write about myself in the sections on each woman rapper's representational choices, the issue of representation is especially important to my understanding of my role as a black woman writer/educator.

For me, challenging how black women are represented in curriculum discourse is a political project with pedagogical implications. In my study, I use theoretical frameworks written by black women to study cultural representations of black women rappers, whom I recognize as legitimate writers/producers of knowledge and whose texts are worthy of scholarly attention. I choose the theorists I cite very deliberately, and I resist reading black women rappers' texts through a white feminist theoretical lens. I am committed to writing/representing that helps to change extant knowledge about young black women in curriculum discourses and to an analysis that I hope will ultimately help to "change and deconstruct a contaminated knowledge base that supports racist/capitalist patriarchy" (Lewis, 1997, p. 49).

Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott

> "A human wake-up call" (Musto, 1999, para. 1)…"A reel-deal bundle of sass and style who does things her way" (Musto, 1999, para. 1)…"A black woman's version of Lifetime" (Chambers, 1999, para. 1)…"A bitch" (McDonnell, 1999, p. 82)…"A real girl" (Morgan quoted in McDonnell, 1999, p.83)…"One of hip hop's cultural magnets" (www.elektra.com, 2004)…"The latest incarnation of the New Negro" (Als, 1997, p. 144)… "The queen bitch of hip hop soul" (Hirshey, 1999, para. 1)… "Always the subject, never an object" (Good, 2001, p. 155)… "A

> Madonna for rap music" (Hirshey, 1999, para. 14)… "A creator, not just an interpreter of other people's words" (Good, 2001, p. 155)…

These descriptions of Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott are only a beginning. Whether she is in the studio producing a song for Whitney Houston, dressed in Superhero white tights and red boots or an inflatable trash bag for her next video, appearing in a Gap jeans commercial alongside Madonna, or bankrolling a project for one of the artists on her record label The Gold Mind, Inc., Missy Elliott and her work defy categorization. She is constantly crossing boundaries as a woman performer, producer, and businessperson and creating new paths for other women rappers and music entrepreneurs to follow.

Missy's list of accomplishments as rap artist, songwriter, producer, director, label CEO, and spokesperson is impressive. She has won two Grammy awards, 2 BET awards, an American Music award, five Lady of Soul/Soul Train Awards, and an MTV Video of the Year award. Rolling Stone has named her Best Female Hip Hop Artist of the Year twice, and she has earned Billboard's #1 spot in the Female Hip Hop Star category twice. She is also the best-selling woman rapper of all time with 12 million CDs sold worldwide. She has written successful hit songs for a variety of artists across genres including Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Mick Jagger, Aaliyah, and Destiny's Child. She has executive-produced the soundtrack for the film Why Do Fools Fall in Love, and she has made cameo appearances in the film Honey and in the television sitcom Eve. She has also appeared in television advertising campaigns, one for Vanilla Coke and the other for Gap jeans alongside Madonna.

Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott has become a hip hop icon. She is so well known now that you need only to say "Missy" for others to recognize who she is. Alongside Queen Latifah, she is the most powerful woman rapper in the game today. No other woman rapper has the kind of power she wields and creative freedom she enjoys, especially as songwriter and producer. Since 1997, the year of her first album Supa Dupa Fly, Missy Elliott has worked steadily to gain widespread fan support and to establish herself as a major player in the male-dominated rap industry.

I begin my (re) telling of Missy Elliott's story by outlining a few life events and experiences we have in common. Natives of similar-sized Southern cities—Portsmouth, Virginia, and Lafayette, Louisiana—Missy Elliott and I were both born in 1971, about one generation removed from our Civil Rights Movement generation mothers and fathers. The hip hop generation—our generation because we were born between 1965 and 1984—is the first generation not to have to fight to end legalized segregation. We did not have to march in the streets, go to jail in protest, or risk our lives to desegregate buses, lunch counters, and voting booths. We inherited integration and its promises from the Civil Rights Movement. Equal opportunity and unrestricted access to education, employment, entertainment, and housing were won for us by the Old Guard; however, racial profiling, white flight from public schools, limited access to middle-class earning jobs, gated suburban subdivisions, and increased poverty became our realities.

Missy and I both grew up as only children to single, struggling-to-make-ends-meet mothers. They lived the effects of a failed sustainable materialization of economic, social, political, and educational Civil Rights Movement gains. With no extra money for childcare, our mothers sent us to their sisters' houses while they worked, so we did a lot

of growing up with aunts and cousins. Our extended family played a crucial role in helping our mothers to raise us. We still remember and appreciate the sacrifices our mothers made to ensure our well-being and happiness. We both recognize our mothers as our most important teachers, and we credit them for being our most influential role models, teaching us through example how to become strong, self-sufficient women. Missy's mother Patricia, a dispatcher for a utility company, left her husband when Missy was thirteen years old because he was violent. Missy says that the day her mother left the abusive marriage after years of physical violence changed her life. Missy explains that her mother's courage to leave taught her that women had to be strong in the world to survive. She says:

> Just watching my mother move from being totally dependent on my father to getting out there and working and doing whatever she had to do to survive and keep me happy makes me realize how strong she was as a female. (Missy quoted in Morgan, 2000, p. 152)

Even earlier than thirteen, Missy learned a hard lesson about survival. An older cousin sexually molested Missy over the course of a year when she was only eight years old. Like so many other victims of abuse, she kept silent for most of her life. About five years ago, Missy went public about the abuse in her family. Even her mother admits to not having the courage to talk to her daughter about the violence they both experienced. It was Missy who initiated the conversation. Missy attributes the breaking of her silence and faith in God with helping her long healing process. Now she serves as national spokesperson for Break the Cycle, a non-profit organization that helps young victims of domestic abuse, ages 12 to 22, with free counseling, advocacy, and legal services. Missy

took the lessons in black girl survival that she learned from home and used them to achieve incredible success in the male-controlled music business.

Writing song lyrics since she was in the sixth grade, transforming her bedroom into a concert arena where she sang for an applauding audience of her "doll babies," and writing letters to Michael and Janet Jackson asking them to pick her up from school and make her a star, Missy dreamed of success for a long time (Chappell, 2001, p. 72). Even though her first record deal with her all-girl group Sista fell through with Elektra Records, she continued to write lyrics over beats produced by Timbaland, fellow Portsmouth, Virginia, native, whom she met through a mutual rapper friend. Timbaland and Missy wrote songs together and produced a hit for singer Aaliyah, which gained them recognition, popularity, and respect in the industry. As the demand for their songs grew, Missy decided to make her own record, and she held off on signing a record deal until the package included her own label. Elektra Entertainment Group CEO Sylvia Rhone offered 22-year-old Missy a writing-producing deal and her own record label, which Good (2001) calls "an unprecedented deal for a new artist" (p. 154), and especially for a woman rapper, I would add. Missy named her record label "The Gold Mind, Inc.," an interesting choice that calls into question stereotypical notions constructing black women as incapable of producing knowledge, producing their own and others' records, and producing/owning wealth. With a record label of her own, Missy earned the opportunity to develop other artists and learn the inner workings of the music business. Missy's first action as label CEO was to sign herself to The Gold Mind, Inc. And the rest of Missy's story in the music business, according to Morgan (2000), is "herstory" (p. 151). Rewind to the beginning of this section for a list of Missy's accomplishments as

rap artist and businesswoman. Rhone comments on Missy's contributions to hip hop in particular and music in general:

> Missy continues to amaze me… She demonstrates a great sense of adventure, a willingness to take risks. In that regard she's peerless. She continues to give hip hop a change of face and in doing so she keeps altering the landscape of popular music. (Rhone quoted in Good, p. 154)

While the list of professional accomplishments by Missy, the black woman rap performer/writer/producer/businesswoman/cultural icon, is remarkable, her commitment to use her voice to break the silence on taboo subjects in the black community within/against a rap industry environment that profits off of the steady denigration of black women is even more significant. I feel a connection to her story. The black girl survival lessons that my grandmother and mother taught me through their examples of strength, self-sufficiency, and speaking up are like the ones Missy learned from her mother. These lessons rise up as larger themes of power, representation, and pedagogy in Missy's life story as well as in her songs.

Power

I became a fan of Missy's work during the process of examining her texts and researching her life story. In Missy, I see a black woman who is on top of her game, who has earned the kind of power (and respect) she needs to dictate her future in the game, and who uses her power to change the rules of the game for women. The hip hop in me says that Missy is a sista who knows how to handle up on her bizniz, who has it goin on, and who is running thangs. As a black woman public high school teacher who sometimes felt powerless in an educational system responsible for the continued disenfranchisement of poor black children, I know the value of a black woman who uses her access and voice

to make space for and empower others like her. As a beginning black woman scholar who sometimes feels marginalized by mostly white European male-driven theoretical discourses, I know the value of a black woman who tells her own story and writes her own representations.

Missy writes her own story and her own representations in her raps. About her creative control, she says, "I am so much more than a rapper or a singer…I am a songwriter, a producer, and an entertainer" (Missy quoted in Good, 2001, p. 150). However, she admits that more significant than any of these is her role as businesswoman, which she says comes "first" (Missy quoted in Good, p. 150). Another powerful black woman rapper still in the business after many years is Queen Latifah, Missy's friend, mentor, and role model, who also focused on her role as businesswoman. Missy comments on Queen Latifah's career path:

> I love the way she planned out her whole career…She was an artist, then a management company, then a sitcom and movie star. She was nominated for Oscars! Ten years ago I'm quite sure she never imagined she would have lasted this long. (Missy quoted in Ali and Ordonez, 2003, para. 5)

When Missy was just starting her career, she refused an offer from rap mogul P. Diddy, who was Puff Daddy then. She was well aware of his success at making rap stars, but she wanted to be in control of her own career trajectory. Missy explains: "As much as I love Puffy and I know he makes stars, I didn't want to be under him…I wanted to be at the same table as him drinking the same champagne. I wanted to buy *him* drinks" (emphasis in original, Missy quoted in Good, p. 150).

Missy chose an unusual career path, especially for a woman in rap, but it worked to ensure her power and longevity in the business. She was a producer before she was an

artist. She says, "I didn't want to just be an artist and let someone else have all that control over *me*…I knew I would have to produce" (emphasis in original, Missy quoted in Als, 1997, p. 148). So Missy learned how to be the person in front of the recording mixing board who has creative control over the process of putting together songs, rather than the artist on the other side of the board who is told what to do. Missy discusses the effect of her gender in her role as producer:

> I've always been the person in front of the board wanting to know, 'What's the volume for this button?' For me to go in and know where the main speaker is on the board, or to know about pan left, pan right, without them having to tell me, I think that was intimidating to men. They couldn't just come in and play macho, and be, like, 'this is here,' because I already knew all that. (Missy quoted in McDonnell, 1999, p. 84)

When Missy enters the studio, male engineers must give the controls to her. Men must take her seriously.

I began taking Missy Elliott seriously when she released the single "She's A Bitch" from her second album Da Real World (Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999). Almost immediately, I was drawn—at first, negatively—to her use of the term *bitch*. I was disappointed that a black woman rapper was calling herself and others the same derogatory name that far too many male rappers call black women in their songs, the label that McDonnell (1999) says men in hip hop use as a "dismissive, generalized epithet for women" (p. 83). But after listening to "She's A Bitch" and other songs on the album, I realized that Missy's use of the term was different and troubling (in a good way.) She seizes the word from patriarchal discourse and uses it on her own terms. In fact, Missy comments in a number of interviews in mainstream magazines on her deliberate attempts to reclaim the bitch label from its negative history and flip the script

on its meaning. Intending to expose the unfair, sometimes oppressive, nature of the rap industry toward women, Missy redefines bitch to mean a strong, opinionated, and powerful woman. She connects the bitch identity to power. She explains the meaning in relation to women rappers not being regarded (and treated) as legitimate emcees in the male-dominated rap industry:

> I want to be using it [the word bitch] in a positive way…I think sometimes you have to be a bitch in this business to get where you want to go. Sometimes you have to put your foot down because this is a male-dominated field. If you don't people will walk all over you. I think bitch is a strong word. I feel like I'm a bitch in power. (Missy quoted in McDonnell, p. 82)

Interestingly enough, Missy says she is more easily heard when she takes on a bitch persona, a woman who says what she wants and how she wants it done without hesitation. Missy also says that the same behavior by men is "just considered aggressive" (Missy quoted in Musto, 1999, para. 6); they are not judged negatively and labeled a bitch as a result of it. She discusses how "putting her foot down" is sometimes misconstrued along gender lines:

> Women are not always taken as seriously as we should be, so sometimes we have to put our foot down. To other people that may come across as being a bitch, but it's just knowing what we want and being confident. If I'm paying people and they're not handling my business right, I have to check them. 'Cause sometimes you're nice and people don't jump on what they're supposed to do. (Missy quoted in Musto, para. 4)

As a young black woman instructor committed to issues of race, class, gender, and language equity in schools who is teaching in an institutional setting with very different goals, I certainly understand Missy's struggle not to appear weak in a competitive work environment. I, too, have felt that "putting my foot down" has been (mis)understood by my overwhelmingly white and Southern elementary education

students as "stepping out of my place." They want to re-enact their Gone With the Wind fantasies; they desire Mammy and, of course, I am nothing like her. On course evaluations, a few students have labeled me "Too aggressive. Not very warm. Very opinionated," "Extremely racist," "Not nice or considerate of people's problems," and "Only concerned with oppression of blacks and women." In these descriptions, which are supposed to be about my performance as teacher, my students might as well have used the bitch label, the patriarchal definition of the word and not how Missy redefines the term, to describe me. I feel I must be the bitch Missy describes, a woman who is strong, confident, and decisive, if I am to survive in my workspace. Though I am still hesitant to call myself a bitch—the term is still a loaded one—I respect Missy's boldness in taking back the word and recoding it with positive connotations for women. We are both women professionals who want to be taken seriously, who want to be respected, and who want to be heard. Missy explains the link between her bitch persona and the realization of her desires as a businesswoman:

> I became a bitch in power because when I walked in, I asked for what I wanted. And at the end of the day, if this is the way I want it, this is the way I'm going to have it. (Missy quoted in McDonnell, 1999, p. 84)

Representation

While I am a fan of Missy's work because she is a woman on top of her game having earned enough power to become a major player in the rap industry, I am also a fan of Missy's work because of her willingness to use her creative control to resist objectification, push boundaries when representing black women, and challenge misogynistic images of black women in the rap industry. Missy has collaborated with Hype Williams and Dave Meyers, popular male music video directors, to create a unique

visual aesthetic that complements what she says on wax. Most of the women characters in her songs sound as strong and confident as Missy appears in her videos. Whether she is dressed in Superhero white tights and red boots, wearing an inflatable neon trash bag suit, donning a bald head and blue-black skin, or swinging from a chandelier with her head severed from the rest of her body, Missy has always managed to catch our attention with cutting-edge images of blackness and blackwoman-ness. She has done so in a rap environment that has allowed women only a few representational options. Good (2001) explains:

> The problem Missy confronts is this: Being a woman who loves and performs hip hop has mostly meant one of two things: either stomping back and forth across stages grabbing virtual dicks or acting like you want to get fucked. It has meant turning a deaf ear and a blind eye to the most ridiculous double standards, historical, sociological, mind-boggling, bamboozling disrespect of and by your own for the sake of the bass. (p. 151)

Even within this environment, Missy has used her creative control to resist demeaning representations of black women, those overdone, objectifying images that have become the norm in rap. Instead she has chosen to present one-of-a-kind images, very different from the norm, and she has still maintained an ever-increasing fan base. Missy describes herself as defying categorization:

> I kind of remain in a category of my own…I'm not a follower. I'm not a copycat. I'm an original. That's important to staying around for a long time. I continuously keep coming up with different stuff. My fans expect something different from me every time. (Missy quoted in Chappell, 2001, p. 69)

The one constant in hip hop is that it is always changing, and Missy has worked change and innovation into all of her work. Emery (2002) says that no one in hip hop is as skilled as Missy in connecting music with image; he says, "Seeing Missy is just as important as hearing her, and when you get both, you get magic" (p. 44).

Describing herself as "tired of seeing all these rappers in videos driving around in Mercedes drinking champagne" (Missy quoted in Good, 2001, p. 155), Missy is all about taking risks and creating something new. Weingarten (2001) credits Missy and her producer partner Timbaland with "shifting the paradigm" of rap with their "new vocabulary of beats" (p. 111). Described by Missy as "double beats," they sound like a fast "fibrillating heartbeat," and they have had the effect of "liberating hip hop from straitjacketed, four-on-the-floor rhythms" (Weingarten, p. 111). Soon after these beats were introduced, many producers began copying (or biting) Missy and Tim's style. Missy's song "Beat Biters" (Da Real World, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999) is a response to the thievery. At one point in the song, Missy takes on a persona that places her above Timbaland, whom she labels "the teacher." In his pedagogical role, Timbaland teaches others the innovative beat patterns, but Missy is the one who has the final say on what grade the beats deserve. Missy raps:

> Stealing our beats like you're the ones who made them
> Timbaland's the teacher, I'm the one that grades them. ("Beat Biters," Da Real World, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999)

To avoid sounding worn out, Missy and Tim change their beat pattern and look to imaginative and unusual resources for inspiration. Missy tells Good that her influences are an eclectic mix of Japanese animation and science fiction (pp. 154-155). When asked about her most recent inspiration, she responds, "Orbit," and explains, "I'm trying to create orbit sounds in the studio. Like what a Martian would sound like if it landed in the studio" (Missy quoted in Good, p. 154). Good even credits Missy with creating her own patois, "a kind of Southern dozens," featuring onomatopoeia, as evidenced in the following lines:

> Izzzy izzzy izzzy ahhh zzziiizzzaaah zizzaaa zzaaah
> Bitches be talking they all rah rah. (p. 155)

This kind of originality has prompted critics to label Missy a "cultural icon" (Als, 1997; Emery, 2002; Kennedy, 2003; Morgan, 2000). Als explains Missy's impact on the rap industry, especially in terms of the imaging of black women:

> Missy Elliott has not only avoided the prevailing stereotypes of the music-video industry; she has spent the last few months bringing the industry around to her style of dance, costume, and song….She has managed to catapult herself beyond the clichéd horny-boy images of girls in Jacuzzis chugalugging champagne. (p. 146)

In reporting these comments about Missy's impact, I do not mean to suggest that all of the images Missy offers to audiences in songs and in videos are unproblematic representations of black women that counter negative stereotypes of black women. They do all call into question mainstream standards of beauty and femininity and problematize the representation of black women by hip hop artists in some significant way. [My focus in the following chapters is a closer examination of these representations in women rappers' song lyrics.]

Early in Missy's career, she was told to remain in songwriting because her "look," specifically that she was a chocolate brown, "plus-sized" woman with short hair, was not "right" for performing and selling records. She says of her look: "I wasn't what people wanted to see—the light skin with the long hair blowing in the wind and the Janet Jackson six-pack" (Missy quoted in Eliscu, 2003, para. 5). She did not meet the standard of a typical hip hop hotty: thick—but not fat—with a big butt and long, flowy caramel-colored hair (weave). For a visual image, think bootylicious R&B/pop star Beyoncé. Despite the warning from record executives about her physical features, Missy entered

the rap arena as a performer and connected with male and female audiences through imaginative and sometimes playful images of herself, especially in videos.

Missy does not package and sell herself to audiences —and is not packaged and sold by male record executives as is often the case with women rappers—only in terms of male-defined sexual appeal. Record company executives often tell women rappers that they have to be "nasty roughnecks" and "dress half-naked and use sex as gimmick" if they want to be successful in the business (Chappell, 2001, p. 70). Realizing that an emcee's legitimacy comes as a result of her talent, not as an outcome of what she wears or how sexually stimulating her lyrics are, Missy chooses representations of strong, confident women for her records and videos. Missy explains the power of women as image-makers in rap and the effects of the images she presents to audiences. She says:

> Females bring style, image to rap…Guys pretty much can be in some jeans and say whatever they want to say. We're the real trendsetters. You have a lot of young female teenagers who look up to us and want to be sassy like we are. (Missy quoted in Chappell, p. 70)

On each of her five albums, Missy offers raps that deal with (hetero)sexuality from a black woman's perspective. Many of the women in her songs boldly express their sexual desire; the women say what they want from men, when they want it from them, and how they want it done. Familiar with the historical tendency to silence public expression of black women's sexuality, Missy explains her refusal to keep silent when asked if she thinks fans have more difficulty hearing sexually explicit lyrics from a woman rapper. She responds referencing the Victorian construct of an ideal lady:

> Oh, of course. Because females, we kind of have stood in the background, and we wasn't supposed to talk. We never had a voice like that, but for a long time guys've been talking like that…Guys can say whatever, but girls are supposed to

> be ladylike and quiet, not saying nasty and vulgar things. (Missy quoted in Eliscu, 2003, para. 16)

Indicative of her sexual frankness is the oft-quoted line from her rap "Pussycat" on her fourth album Under Construction (Elektra Entertainment Group, 2002). The woman in the song who is about to engage in a sexual encounter with a man she finds highly desirable says to herself, "Pussy, don't fail me now!" Playful yet still forceful, Missy's sexual representations most often center on women's sexual pleasure and satisfaction, rather than on men's. Chappell (2001) concludes that Missy has been successful in striking a balance between the "down-and-dirty" and "natural" (p. 70) in her sexual expressions so as to relate to women fans. Drawing a similar conclusion, Good (2001) maintains that even with the "freaky" sexual expressions in Missy's raps, she is very different from the "exploited women disrespecting themselves and their sexuality in hip hop because of desperation" (p. 151). Weingarten (2001) also comments on Missy's success in creating sexual expressions that are not defined by male sexual gratification or a male standard of beauty centered on thinness and whiteness:

> Unlike stars like Madonna, who equate sex with power but really pander to the fantasy life of men, Missy's new sexual frankness truly is a form of empowerment, because it's being done on her own terms. When you're Missy's kind of beautiful—the kind that doesn't fit the standard set by mainstream, white America—you can't be co-opted by a music industry that values the commodification of flesh. (p. 110)

Missy has expressed a commitment to keeping it real and being herself when performing. For the most part, she has not given in to industry pressures to look a certain way or rap from a perspective other than her own. Instead, she critiques, especially in her videos, these same industry standards that pressure all black women performers to morph into Beyoncé. Missy says she wants audiences to "just look at the concept [of the videos]

and love the records" for themselves, and she adds, "I don't have to lose weight or get into a certain kind of clothing. I can just be me and people are going to love it" (Missy quoted in Morgan, 2000, p. 150). I have recognized this kind of confidence coming through on all of Missy's projects. McDonnell (1999) quotes Morgan who explains Missy's appeal: "She's [Missy's] a real girl. She's not setting some visual standard women can't keep up with. She's incredibly talented, strong, and self-possessed in a way women identify with and men respect" (p. 83).

Missy says that her plus-sized women fans thank her often for representing big women as sexy, confident, stylish, and cool because they were "sick of seeing skinny women on TV" (Missy quoted in Musto, 1999, para. 40). When Missy shed 30 pounds because of her doctor's warnings about the dangerous combination of being overweight and hypertensive, a few fans expressed their anger on Missy's official record label website. They read her weight loss and subsequent video for "Pass that Dutch" (This Is Not a Test, Elektra Entertainment Group, 2003), in which big women are jokingly featured in sexually provocative clothing piling into a car to cruise for a man, as contradictory to her prior commitment not to bow to the pressures of rap industry, male-defined standards of beauty. Missy responded with a general letter addressed to all of her fans in which she explained the reasons for her weight loss. Missy writes:

> To all of my fans who are upset about this [weight loss], I still represent for overweight adults & kids but I am also painfully and personally aware of the health issues. Many of you know, and for those who don't, that I was diagnosed with hypertension. This very serious condition can lead to strokes and heart attacks and very often death. It has made me seriously ill in the past and my mother was also hospitalized after a heart attack a few years ago resulting from high blood pressure. I am an only child, I am all my mother has. I love myself & I love the people I would leave behind if I don't take care of my health. Weight was my issue & I had to drop the pounds. (www.elektra.com, 2004)

Missy mentions male rapper Big Pun's death and male R&B singer Luther Vandross's stroke as extreme examples her fans would quickly recognize. She asks them to be supportive of her efforts to get healthy reminding them of her history of representing plus-sized, confident women. She writes later in the letter:

> For those who felt that I was poking fun in the "Pass the Dutch" video, I simply meant that you should dress right for your body size. I have always been a big girl myself and I always took pride in the fact that I never had to change my body to be considered beautiful or successful. I think I have always represented pride in yourself no matter what size you are. (www.elektra.com, 2004)

Missy's weight loss followed by the comical images of large women in the video for "Pass the Dutch" became a complicated matter for Missy. After a health scare, she needed to lose the weight to regain her health and increase her chances of living longer. Some of her fans perhaps felt abandoned by a star they once looked to as a role model for full-figured, confident young women. Perhaps they felt she gave in to the pressures of the industry standards that privilege thinness and whiteness as markers for beauty. I certainly understand their frustration with some of the images of plus-sized women in the video for "Pass the Dutch." The scene with the big women in the car cannot be quickly dismissed by Missy's "poking fun" explanation. While the representations are clearly meant to be funny, they can also be read as demeaning, specifically that overweight women are not sexually desirable. Missy's response that her message was about dressing "right" for one's size seems out of sync with her collection of images in previous videos. "Dressing right" seems contradictory for someone who has appeared in videos wearing an inflated neon-colored vinyl suit, dressed in an oversized white and red Superhero

costume, and donning a bald head with blue-black skin. Furthermore, what does Missy mean exactly by "dressing right for your body size?"

I think representations like these that raise questions not easily answered are important for us to consider. Even with—perhaps because of—the contradictions, the images that Missy creates bring something new to the discourse of rap and help to expose old patriarchal practices in the representation of black women. The images that Missy constructs challenge other (mis)representations of black women that demean, distort, and objectify who we really are. The images say to patriarchy that we will not be silent and we will define ourselves. Missy explains how her songs with strong black women characters sometimes reflect everyday real-life black women and our struggle against sexism:

> Women seem strong in my songs because that's not just a song anymore…This is what we experience in everyday life, in business, relationships, whatever. Females are starting to be a lot stronger and have self-confidence. Like 'I don't need you, I'm going to get my own—my own job, my own money. You want to leave, leave. You cheating on me and you think I'm going to stay here? No! I have my own stuff now, so you gotta go.' (Missy quoted in Hirshey, 1999, para. 16)

Pedagogy

The representations of outspoken, confident, and strong black women in Missy's songs teach me about myself in my roles as black woman teacher, writer, lover, and sistafriend. I experience some of the same struggles the women in her songs face in my work and home spaces, and I am sure that other black women see some of themselves and their lives in the songs as well. To illustrate the realness of Missy's songs for black women, Chambers (1999) describes her lyrics as "sister-girlfriend as a Terry McMillan novel" (para. 5) and the "black woman's version of Lifetime" (para. 1). Missy calls

herself an “everyday songwriter” because listeners can say, “Ooh, I’ve been through that” (Missy quoted in Nelson, 1997, para. 11), about the experiences she raps about in her songs. Missy describes her style: “If you listen to my songs, they tell stories. I don’t write in song form, I write almost as if I’m in conversation with somebody. That’s my way of getting something off my chest” (Missy quoted in Musto, 1999, para. 16).

The lessons offered through Missy’s conversations with her listeners are especially significant for black women: Define yourself…. Write your own representations…. Don’t cover up the contradictions in those representations…. Speak up on all matters, especially taboo subjects…. Don’t take no shit from any man…. Build community with other women…. Make your own money…. Be you. More than any other reason, I am fan of Missy’s work because of these lessons. I do not suggest that Missy’s representations of black women are always positive and uplifting, but I do maintain that they are always pedagogical. They help us to define ourselves.

Missy has commented extensively on her roles as businesswoman and performer and writer, but she has also commented on her influence as a role model for youth. Much of what she says about her positioning as a role model suggests that she understands the pedagogical potential of her work. Even though Missy admits that most rap artists do not want to be role models for their impressionable young fans because they are human beings who sometimes make mistakes, Missy understands that she has become a role model to young people. She chooses to use her voice and access to address social problems that she experienced growing up. A survivor of incest and domestic violence, Missy says she is committed to doing everything she can to prevent other children from experiencing the violence she endured as a child. As spokesperson for Break the Cycle, a

non-profit organization who helps young victims of domestic abuse with free counseling, advocacy, and legal services, Missy educates the public about violence inflicted upon mothers and children. She understands the impact her entertainer status has in potentially effecting change in young victims' lives. She explains why she went public with her story after many years of silence:

> We see entertainers with their cars and their jewelry, and we think they have the good life…But everything ain't always sweet and sugarcoated. I was molested. I went through seeing my father fight my mother almost every day. There are a lot of people in the world who live like that. When an entertainer steps forward and lets the world know that they've been there too, it seems that you can go through this and still be somebody. (Missy quoted in Morgan, 2000, p. 152)

She also says that she refused to continue her silence because being able to speak about the violence inflicted upon her as a child is now part of her healing. "Now I feel free" (Missy quoted in Morgan, p. 152), she says about giving voice to her pain. In speaking about her own experiences as a survivor, she teaches listeners about a serious social problem and at the same time may empower some victims through Break the Cycle.

When discussing the influence rap entertainers have as role models, Missy distinguishes between men and women. She says that women extend their role as performer with songs that do more than just entertain. They intend for some songs to be pedagogical. Missy explains:

> Women in hip hop are more positive. You're almost giving that mother instinct, and you think about the children. Not to say anything bad about the males, but from their standpoint, it's more, 'Yo, it's cool right now to talk about this….' Instead of just being an artist and making good records, I have to extend further cause kids respect entertainers. Whether you want it or not, you are a role model. I'm going to be talking to kids about abuse, cause I went through watching my father abuse my mother, and I was sexually abused at eight. There's so many people being abused or watching their parents fight, and they need to know how you got over it and what they can do. We should touch more positive stuff these

> days, cause the world is getting crazier and crazier. (Missy quoted in Oumano, 1999, para. 26)

Though Missy constructs the role of teacher in relation to motherhood or as "ideologically congruent with women's supposed innate nurturing capacities" (Munro, 1998b, p. 3), she still understands that her work has pedagogical potential. A more complex world with more serious problems prompted Missy on her most recent album This Is Not a Test (Elektra Entertainment Group, 2003) to attend to issues relevant to the social context now. The rap "Wake Up" expresses Missy's thoughts about materialism. She says the rap was meant to convey her belief that "a fly person doesn't need anything but self-respect and appreciation to be fly" and "at the end of the day, material possessions don't mean a thing" (Missy quoted in Paoletta, 2003, para. 23). Missy's thoughts about materialism in this rap are a departure from—perhaps a contradiction to—the many songs of hers which suggest that material possessions do mean everything. Either way, Missy's views about materialism are indeed pedagogical.

In addition to materialism, Missy has addressed the problem of HIV/AIDS in the black community. During a national tour together, Missy, Beyoncé, and Alicia Keyes gave fans an opportunity to earn free tickets to their shows by listening to facts about how to stop the spread of HIV and by taking an HIV test first. She has also expressed concern about increasing violence between rappers and within the larger American context and her intent to offer raps with a "Stop the Violence" message like earlier rappers did with their collective rap "Self-Destruction" (Stop the Violence All-Stars, 1989). Missy explains her intentions for her album Under Construction (Elektra Entertainment Group, 2002):

> Hip hop has changed a lot over the last decade…It's very tense, with rappers feuding and fighting, and there's a serious edge to it. When I grew up, there was a lot more fun and a lot more unity in hip hop. We had Stop the Violence movements and all the rap battles were just on record, it wasn't real life. And we've lost people because it's changed. So I wanted to make a record that might bring people back together, inject some fun back into hip hop and remind people how it used to be. Maybe even have a message on there like the "Self Destruction" record, act like the role-models we are. (Missy quoted in Emery, 2002, p. 45)

It is important to note here that rivalries between rappers that have escalated into violent confrontations have mostly been between men. Missy offers a solution to the problem that goes beyond a record with positive, uplifting themes. She suggests that rap artists reconceptualize their relationship with one another in familial terms. She explains:

> What you gotta remember is: We still like family. And like in your family, in a regular family, you might argue with your sister and brother or whatever, and you can do that. But when somebody on the outside starts attacking, then it's a problem. And that's the whole thing. Don't let nobody ever know there's a problem in your home like that. (Missy quoted in Satten, 2003, p. 96)

Hinting here at racial solidarity, Missy warns rappers to keep disagreements in house so as not to become vulnerable to destructive attacks from the "outside." Missy's suggestion to rappers about keeping their "home" intact is one of many important lessons she offers to all black folks in the United States. I end this section with Missy's comments that remind me of a veteran teacher with some years of experience behind her who has now set realistic goals for herself and her work:

> I can't go and heal the world….I'm not perfect myself. It's almost like a preacher preaching to a congregation, and then he go outside and smoke a cigarette. So that's why I don't try to get into all that. I just do what I love to do and hopefully somebody will get something from it. (Missy quoted in Satten, p. 96)

<u>Eve</u>

> "My image is Eve as I really am" (Eve quoted in Tate, 2001, p. 161)… "I may be a rapper, but I am a woman first" (Eve quoted in Hopkins, 2000, para. 1)… "I

> never even thought about that word until I heard it. But if feminist means being independent and pro woman, I guess I would have to say I am" (Eve quoted in Edwards, 2001, p. 125)… "I'm conscious of me being an entertainer and having a voice. I feel I do have to teach along the way" (Eve quoted in Edwards, p. 125)…

My retelling of Eve's story is all about image. Eve has created an image for herself as a woman rapper and more recently as an actor that is both street and mainstream America, strong and vulnerable, t-shirts and Chanel, roughneck and girly, risky and reserved. Not easily categorized, Eve's image is located somewhere in the in-between of all of these. When describing Eve, critics most often use language suggestive of a continuum. For example, Tate (2001) describes Eve as "somewhere between Lauryn Hill's House of Afrocentric Spirits and Lil Kim's Rough Sex and Magick Shoppe" (p. 158). Edwards (2001) maintains that Eve can "run with the dogs and not become a bitch" and that her style is "edgy but not vulgar, hard-core but not cheap" (p. 122). Ali (2001) says that Eve "walks a fine line between the empowering, old-school style of Queen Latifah and the trashy titillation of Lil Kim" (para. 3).

Eve's ability to blur lines and cross boundaries and show her talent as a legitimate emcee has won her widespread appeal. It has secured her place in history as the highest debuting woman rapper ever on both Billboard's Top 200 Albums and R&B charts with the #1 position on both. It has won her a Grammy for her rap collaboration entitled "Let Me Blow Ya Mind" (Scorpion, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 2001) with Gwen Stefani, lead singer of the rock/pop band No Doubt. It has enabled her to successfully cross over into acting in five films to date and in her own television sitcom on UPN. It has even helped her to launch her own clothing line called Fetish. She has achieved all of these successes with an image that works because it represents the complicatedness of

black women. Eve's image constantly moves and shifts resisting simplistic either/or classifications, and it is sometimes contradictory. Above all, it is an image that is centered on women's independence, strength, confidence, and outspokenness. Even though Eve does not easily claim the "feminist" label to describe herself, I do hear a womanist[7] spirit in Eve's songs and in her comments to critics about "uplifting women" (Eve quoted in Ford, 2002, p. 146), the necessity of "collectivity" to bring about real change (Eve quoted in Ford, p. 146), and her commitment to writing songs that "make a difference" and show that she "stands for something" (Eve quoted in Edwards, 2001, p. 124).

I do not have as much in common with Eve as I do with Missy. Even though our life stories are mostly different, a few events and experiences are worth outlining here. Eve is not my same age and not a native of the South. Born Eve Jihan Jeffers in 1978, Eve is seven years younger than I am, and she is a native of Philadelphia. Eve's mother was only seventeen years old when she had Eve. She raised Eve alone, her only child for the next fourteen years until she married and had a son. Like Missy and me, Eve recognizes her mother as her most important teacher, and she credits her mother for being her most influential role model. Through her example, Eve learned how to be a strong, independent woman. Going to school while working, Eve's mother survived her struggles as a young mother to provide for her daughter. In three separate interviews, Eve discusses the important lessons her mother taught her about survival. In one

[7] See Alice Walker's In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983).

interview, Eve talks about what she learned from her mother about relationships with men:

> My mom takes no shit from nobody…She was a young mother, and I saw some of her relationships and learned how she dealt with men and situations. I'm not going to deal with a person loving me less than I should be loved. (Eve quoted in Edwards, 2001, p. 125)

In another interview, Eve explains what she learned from her mother about the necessity of self-sufficiency. She says:

> I knew girls that were so dependent on men for everything…I've never been like that. That comes from my mother. She said you should be able to do what you wanna do when you wanna do it, and never have to depend on another person. (Eve quoted in Ali, 2002, para. 5)

And the most practical lesson for all women, according to Eve's mother, is to "always have your own bank account, even when you get married" (Eve quoted in Dunn, 2003, p. 62). Eve says that all of these lessons guide her personal and professional lives today. These lessons about independence and self-love are also reflected in many of Eve's songs.

When her mother married, mother and daughter moved from Mill Creek Housing Projects in West Philadelphia to Germantown, a middle-class suburban neighborhood. Perhaps growing up in two very different worlds laid some of the foundation for Eve's both/and-image; she is both middle America and the hood, both b-girl and elegant, both Timbs and Manolos. Eve says that she is fortunate to have "seen both sides of life" (Eve quoted in Goldman, 2000, p. 157). Though my experience living in an economically deprived, all-black neighborhood and going to an overwhelmingly white Catholic school across town is not the same as Eve's movement into a middle-class neighborhood and lifestyle, I do understand the pressures of surviving and succeeding in an environment

very different from my homespace. I also have benefited from seeing other sides of life. In my current schooling environment, a large predominantly white public university located in the Deep South, I still move between two very different worlds and still struggle with keeping my sense of (home)self (and language) intact. Eve struggled to keep her sense of self as well during her years in Catholic school. She says of her brief Catholic school experience, "I went to Catholic school for two years wondering, 'What is this Trinity thing?' They were like 'Shut up already'" (Eve quoted in Tate, 2001, p. 162).

Eve says that she always knew she wanted a career in the music business. In her early teens, she was a member of an all-girl singing group, but she realized she was better at writing rhymes and rapping. Eve began winning rap battles against the boys in her Philadelphia high school cafeteria. "It was always against the guys," Eve recalls about the battles, "so I was representing for every girl in the high school" (Eve quoted in Dunn, 2003, p. 62). Before she graduated, she formed a female rap duo called Dope Girl Posse, and they performed at local talent shows and clubs. When the group broke up, Eve began her solo career under the name Eve of Destruction.[8] Chappell (2001) says that Eve did not like high school, was certain that she would not like college, and set a goal for a record deal by age 20 (p. 72). She secured her first deal with Aftermath Records when she was 19, but Dr. Dre, the label CEO, was focused on producing Eminem's debut album. Eve's one-year contract ran out before she could complete an album. While in Los Angeles, she met male rapper DMX of Ruff Ryders Records and after proving her

[8] An interesting side note about Eve's choice of name is that Eve of Destruction is also a 1991 science fiction film starring Amsterdam native Renee Soutendijk and black American actor Gregory Hines. In the film, Soutendijk plays two characters, a robot and the robot's creator, who are both named Eve. The robot's arsenal of weapons includes a nuclear weapon, and when she is damaged during a bank robbery, a rescue team, headed by Hines and Soutendijk, must stop her path of destruction before she blows up the world.

skills as an emcee in an impromptu rap freestyle battle with male rappers Drag-On and Infa-Red, Eve landed her second recording contract. Not everyone at the Ruff Ryders label believed in her potential. Eve explains:

> [Ruff Ryders] had other girls there before who turned out to be groupies, but they saw that I worked like this was my life *and* my business. There were people there who believed I was going to be the next one and they helped me believe in myself. But there were bets on me. People around the company were betting on whether or not I could do the album. It's all good because I proved myself and those who bet against me lost their money. (emphasis in original, Eve quoted in Tate, 2001, p. 162)

Eve proved the doubters wrong with three very successful albums. Back now with the Aftermath Records label, Eve is currently working on her fourth album and acting and managing her clothing line. She describes her current professional roles: "I'm not just a rapper anymore. I'm a slasher—slash this [actress], slash that [fashionista]. I'm an artist, so there's a lot of things that I wanna do" (Eve quoted in Jenkins, 2004, p. 112).

Power

Eve has not gained the kind of power and influence that Missy has earned in the rap business. Though she serves as one of the executive producers for her television sitcom, Eve is not a label CEO or producer in the rap industry. However, she has garnered more creative control with each successive album. Even though Eve writes her own songs, she admits that on her first album, she gave in to label pressures to write songs that were not in keeping with the stories she wanted to tell. Eve explains that the direction of her first album was mostly male-driven, and she gives an example of one song about a woman gangsta figure robbing a bank that she did not want to do. [I analyze excerpts from this song in Chapter 6.] She says:

> The lyrics were mine, but the vision was pretty much theirs [the Ruff Ryder camp's]. Like there was a song about a heist that was totally the guys' idea. After that, I promised myself I would never make a song about shooting, robbing, anything like that, 'cause it's not me. (Eve quoted in Ali, 2001, para. 6)

Since then, Eve says she has refused to do songs if they do not reflect her ideas. When asked about a ten-year plan for herself, she responds, "Hopefully I'll be sitting behind a desk making power decisions, and having power business meetings. That's basically my goal, to be a woman of power" (Eve quoted in Goldman, 2000, p. 156).

Proving herself as a legitimate emcee in a male-dominated field is a recurring theme in Eve's comments about the struggles she faces in the rap industry. "I have had to work twice as hard as the men" (Eve quoted in Chappell, 2001, p. 70), Eve says about establishing herself as a successful performer who is respected by her peers for her rapping talent. She explains how women are underestimated and not regarded as equals by men in the industry. She says:

> When my album first dropped, I had a male rapper say to me, 'Yeah, congratulations on your album. I hope you go platinum.' I said, 'I'm trying to go double or triple.' He said, 'You know females don't get that type of run in this game.' And I said, 'What?' That was crazy for him to say. That right there tells you that males don't really think of female rappers as being as good or better than them. But I proved niggas wrong. (Eve quoted in Kenon, 2000, para. 13)

Eve's struggle for legitimacy in her field seems similar to the difficulties women academics and academics of color—regardless of gender—often face in predominantly white universities. I, too, feel the pressures of "working twice as hard" as some of my peers. As is often the case with black women students in predominantly white schooling environments, I have had to locate texts not on the required reading lists for curriculum theory classes by black women scholars that speak to my experiences so as to understand/translate the required texts, which often do not speak to my experiences. For

example, I turned to Zora Neale Hurston's descriptions of the horizon, a recurring image in Dust Tracks on a Road and Their Eyes Were Watching God to understand the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion (1989) of "fusion of horizons" (p. 306), a constantly shifting vantage point from which we understand ourselves and the world. I turned to bell hooks' chapter "Choosing the Margin" in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (1990) and her discussions of "marginality"and "home" to make sense of Homi Bhabha's notions of "interstitiality" and "unhomeliness" in The Location of Culture (1994). I turned to a number of black lesbian feminists' writing on black women's sexualities, namely Audre Lorde (1984) and Evelyn Hammonds (1997a, 1997b), to inject some color into my very Greek-centered History of Sexuality class. I also feel the pressures of proving myself capable of scholarly writing/theorizing in the curriculum studies field while staying true to my commitment to write an analysis of black women's texts in a way that is accessible to readers not connected to academic settings.

Eve explains that her acceptance as a legitimate emcee has been hindered by her appearance. Eve maintains that instead of paying attention to her skills, male peers have tended to focus on her sexual attractiveness. She sums up her dilemma with a comment that suggests her male peers' attitude: "Eve can rhyme, but look at her ass" (Eve quoted in Diehl, 1999, para. 25). She concludes that rejecting male peers' sexual advances ultimately helped her to earn their respect. She says:

> When I started, guys were like, 'Wow, you got skills, but can I take you out?' And I really had to show people that I'm doing business, just like you are, and if you can't respect me for my talent, then there's nothing you can say to me. And that's where my respect grew from—showing them that I was strictly business. (Eve quoted in Goldman, 2000, p. 156)

Eve says that too many mainstream journalists have also not taken her skills as a rapper as seriously as they should. They too have focused on her body instead of her work. Regretting her decision to tell the mainstream press about her very brief experience as a stripper in the Bronx when she was seventeen years old, Eve says that reporters still ask her to talk about her stripping days and they still label her "the former dancer" (Eve quoted in Dunn, 2003, p. 62). She has exposed this sexist tendency of reporters by pointing out that male rappers have been granted the space to talk about their drug dealing days before they became famous without it becoming "a big thing" (Eve quoted in Diehl, 1999, para. 21). Drug dealing for male rappers has become a marker for legitimacy. A drug-dealing past affords male rappers street credibility and in turn mainstream audience support, for as Eve concludes, "whatever the streets think is cool the world thinks is cool, and that's real" (Eve quoted in Jenkins, 2004, p. 112). Stripping for Eve, which she describes as a "hustle" similar to drug dealing in that she did it to earn a lot of quick money, is not a marker for her legitimacy as an emcee (Eve quoted in Diehl, 1999, p. 21). The stripping hustle has not earned Eve street credibility like the drug hustle has for some male rappers. Rather, it has become a stigma, a stain on her past that continues to deflect attention away from her work and accomplishments as a serious rapper. Despite all of this, Eve's success and fan base have steadily increased. She continues to command respect from her male peers. She says, "I'm doing my thing just like [male rappers] are. Respect me, respect my work, or leave me alone" (Eve quoted in Chappell, 2001, p. 74).

Representation

Critics in the mainstream magazine articles I reviewed often describe Eve as a balance of two extremes, a mix of polar opposites, a blend of two different worlds. Somewhere at the crossroads between the ghetto and suburbia, counter- and mainstream cultures, hard and vulnerable, ruffneck and runway sits Eve, a performer who comes across as a regular sista from around the way with an eclectic fashion sense, a performer who seems in control of her own image and messages. Characterizing Eve as a mix of multiple personas, Tate (2001) aptly captures Eve's image. He says:

> Being neither a roots goddess nor an urban bush nymph, Eve had to present another recipe for becoming a household name: Mix three parts keep-it-raw with five parts skillz, pour on seven parts ghetto-glamorous-and-gangsta-friendly, sprinkle liberally with megadoses of down-for-all-my-girls-holding-it-down-in the-'hood, then stir and strut. (p. 158)

In addition to Tate, a number of other critics comment on the both/and qualities of her image (Ali, 2001, 2002; Chappell, 2001; Edwards, 2001; Farley, 2001; Rogers, 1999; Solomon, 2000). To some, Eve's image could be construed as nothing more than a well-planned marketing strategy to sell as many records as possible to a diverse cross-section of fans. However, it is this complexity that plays well with real women. The both/and-ness of Eve feels familiar to many black women. Many of us are walking contradictions who are constantly changing and crossing boundaries in order to survive and succeed in different social and professional environments. We understand Eve's movement between the streets and mainstream America, high fashion and casual gear, toughness and vulnerability, independence and dependence.

"Eve does Eve," says Jay Jackson, a producer with whom Eve has collaborated, about the authenticity of her image (Jackson quoted in Ford, 2002, p. 146). Describing

herself in a similar manner, Eve maintains that her image is grounded in who she really is. She warns other artists against representing themselves in ways that are not in keeping with who they really are. She says:

> There is nothing wrong with growing. But don't do something that is not you. That's a really big mistake, and that's something that I'm conscious about. I have to be Eve no matter what. I don't care where I am. I have to be Eve. I grow every day. I grow every second. I call myself a chameleon. I'm changing all the time. But I'm still Eve. Whatever's in my heart and my mind, whatever my first instinct is, whatever feels right for me, that's what I do. If I do that, I'll be okay. (Eve quoted in Chappell, 2001, p. 72)

In an industry in which women performers are left with very few representational options if they do not choose to package themselves as (hetero)sex objects, Eve expresses a commitment to keeping it real. She says that when she entered the business, she was not sure that she could be herself and still be successful. She feared that her choice not to be "naked," that is, not to sell herself as sex object, would hurt her chances of building a large fan base (Eve quoted in Tate, 2001, p. 161). Writing songs about what she knew and felt instead of what someone else told her to write worked for Eve. She explains: "When I started keepin' it real is when I realized, 'All right, I don't have to try and be nobody else.' The world can accept it or not accept it, but it feels good just being me" (Eve quoted in Tate, p. 162). She adds that her decision to be herself helped in gaining women fans. She discusses their reaction to her: "People always tell me I represent for real females. Like, 'Girl, you got your clothes on, and that's great because we wear clothes, too'" (Eve quoted in Tate, p. 161). Distinguishing herself from women rappers who are marketed and sold as sexual commodities, Eve constructs an image and tells stories with which I, and other young black women, can identify. Eve's manager, Troy Carter, sums up the appeal, authenticity, and complexity of his client. He says:

> She's like that cool girl who lives down the street from you. The one you can talk to, relate to, but at the same time, she has that cuteness and sexiness about her. She can either hang with the dogs or hang with the girls. It's something that's natural…A lot of female artists who have come out have been fabricated. They have men writing for them, men who are producing for them. She thinks for herself. She's speaking for the average 22-year-old-woman. (Carter quoted in Chappell, 2001, p. 70)

Pedagogy

Of all the women rappers I include in this study, Eve has been the most self-reflexive in mainstream magazine articles about her public pedagogical role. She has expressed a commitment to writing songs that teach and to making sure they are included on each album. She says:

> I don't listen to a lot of hip-hop anymore because I can't respect it…Some people are gonna hate me for this, but it's like you're not busting guns anymore. We got in the business to get away from all of that. If you're gonna talk about it, at least have a moral to the story. You're not sellin' drugs anymore. It's like, 'C'mon! Talk about something else.' (Eve quoted in Ali, 2002, para. 3)

Eve even quotes her mother's desire for her performer daughter to "go back to teaching" with "songs that mean something" (Eve quoted in Ford, 2002, p. 150).

Coupled with Eve's commitment to songs that teach is a gender-specific focus on women's issues. Emphasizing the significance of women rappers' voices in the public discourse of rap, Eve says, "Female rappers have their own stories to tell about being women. We're coming up and claiming our spot—it's our time to shine" (Eve quoted in Samuels, 1999, para. 4). She discusses her intent to use her voice to tell stories about the particular struggles women face because she wants women to "know how strong they are" (Eve quoted in Farley, 2001, para. 6). She says:

> I'm conscious of me being an entertainer and having a voice. I feel I do have to teach along the way. I'm only 22 and got a lot more to learn, but I feel I know enough about respecting myself that I can pass that on. I have to say something to

> know that I kind of made a difference, or at least made people know that I stand for something other than just wanting to make somebody shake their ass or sing my songs. (Eve quoted in Edwards, 2001, p. 125)

Hesitant about labeling herself "feminist" until Edwards (2001) defines it as "being independent and pro woman" (p. 125), Eve admits that women fans tell her they are "uplifted" by her songs (Eve quoted in Ford, 2002, p. 146). Borrowing a recurring theme from black women activists' discourse, Eve brings "uplift" to the discourse of rap. Eve's contemporary version suggests that women are responsible for initiating changes in men. She says:

> A lot of women tell me that I uplift them…We gotta do it collectively. We got to make men change their minds. Men will treat women differently when we change…We have to change our styles first. Guys say 'bitch,' 'ho' and this and that, but I've been on the road, ya know what I'm saying? I see how a lot of women disrespect themselves. When we change our actions, men will change their minds. I think a lot of women get tired of hearing that shit. I'm glad that women feel like I can uplift them…That's how I feel about myself. I am a strong woman. (Eve quoted in Ford, p. 146)

In another article, Eve continues to discuss similar themes: "I would like women to be independent, doing they own thing, and know that we are smarter than men in every way except emotionally. And once we control that, we'll be all right" (Eve quoted in Edwards, p. 125).

Eve says she is careful about the number of songs she includes on each album that have an intended pedagogical purpose. Fearing that her audience will not accept too many "positive" songs, she codes songs in a manner with which her audiences are familiar. Eve explains:

> The type of music that I'm leaning toward is positive…But at the same time, I'm knowing my audience. Some of the songs may be vulgar as hell, but I make them like that on purpose so certain people can listen. (Eve quoted in Solomon, 2000, p. 206)

Eve's comments here remind me of my own "slip-it-in-through-the-back-door" pedagogical approach with apathetic high school students. When studying an especially difficult piece of literature, I made sure to include a fun and meaningful start-up activity that incorporated content with which students were familiar so as to introduce them to the themes of the more unfamiliar, difficult text we would study later. In other words, I slipped in the more complicated text after gaining students' confidence with the start-up one.

For example, as preparation for the study of "London, 1802" and "The World Is Too Much With Us," two sonnets by William Wordsworth about social problems of his day, I asked students to bring in songs about contemporary social problems like domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, drug addiction, suicide, gang violence, and materialism. Students worked in groups to write an explanation of their songs' form, content, and figurative language. Afterward, we discussed and listened to each of the songs from a variety of music genres, paying particular attention to figurative descriptions of the social problems and the rhyme patterns of the songs. Coding my lessons in this manner by using texts with which students were familiar softened my resistant students to studying more challenging texts. Similarly, Eve's use of language that fans expect to hear in rap songs helps in keeping them tuned in to the positive message. Eve suggests that fans are more likely to listen to a song with vulgarity, even one with a positive message, instead of turning it off altogether. About her use of explicit lyrics, Eve says, "I talk like regular people and regular people curse during the day. You got to talk like your people to get through to your people" (Eve quoted in Tate, 2001, p. 161).

The Bad Girls: Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina

When I first heard the raps of Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina, I was horrified. I found their songs disgusting, demeaning, and downright dirty. Triggering my repressed Catholic schoolgirl prudishness, their songs elicited criticism instead of critique, judgment rather than analysis. I cringed at all the pornographic "pussy-eating, deep-throat-dick-sucking, fucking-for-pay" references these women put on wax. When I listened to their freaky tales, I heard my grandmother's voice of scorn whispering in my ear: "You oughtta be shame of yoself; what you need is Jesus." Sounding like the misogynist male rappers I had listened to growing up rather than the other women rappers I had grown to like and respect like Missy and Eve, these women were troubling. And even though I bought every one of their albums—eight in all—I did not listen to and study them as I did other women rappers' texts. The cover art was enough to remind me not to listen, each woman barely clothed showing lots of ass, breasts, and legs in sexually suggestive poses. They looked like centerfolds, rather than rappers.

All three bad girls have been sold as hot sexual commodities. The formula for these women's success is to "sound fuckable and dress accordingly" (Kennedy, 2001, p. 142). The labels critics use to describe these women's personas and lyrics include "raunchy" (Britton, 2000, p. 112; Castro, 1997, para. 3; Farley, 2000, para. 3; Kennedy, 2001, p. 142; Kinnon, 1999, para. 15; Rogers, 2004, para. 1), "freaky" (Kennedy, p. 142), "XXXplicit" (Rogers, 1999, para. 4), "trashy" (Burford and Farley, 1999, p. 72), "hypersexual" (Orecklin, 1999, para. 2), "lewd" (Orecklin, para. 2; Ogunnaike, 2001, p. 110), and "nasty" (Marriott, 2001, p. 132). Critics' judgments are not completely unfounded. On the cover of her first album Da Baddest Bitch (Slip-n-Slide Records,

2000), Trina wears high heels and a white paramedic jacket without any pants as she straddles a wounded brother on a stretcher in the back of an ambulance and pumps his chest with heart-shocking paddles, all of this with her mouth open enough to reveal her rolled-over tongue. For two of Lil Kim's three album covers, the ones after which she had breast implant surgery, she wears no top, and in 2000, she wore nothing but a hat for an ad campaign for her album Notorious K.I.M (Atlantic Recording Corporation, 2000). The outfit that Kim wore to the 1999 MTV Video Music Awards with one breast totally exposed, except for a nipple-covering purple pasty that prompted Diana Ross's fondling of her exposed breast on stage while they presented an award together, has become legendary. Foxy posed for the December1998/January 1999 Vibe magazine cover wearing a barely there string bikini grabbing her breast and crotch, her mouth also slightly open. The focus in all of these women's personas is not on their skills as rappers but on what they offer as sexual stimulation/fantasy for men.

For a long time, I refused to include Lil Kim, Foxy, and Trina in my study because I feared my mostly white readers would group all black women rappers together and dismiss all of their representations as unworthy of serious scholarly attention. Blaming Kim, Foxy, and Trina for the perpetuation of the worst stereotypes of black women in public discourses, I hastily concluded that raps by these three women undermined my contention that women rappers' songs were a kind of public pedagogy. I justified my hasty conclusion by pointing to examples from the women's songs that were especially problematic. I asked myself: What could I possibly learn from Foxy's guest appearance on LL Cool J's rap "I Shot Ya?" She raps:

> Four carats of ice
> Pussy banging like Versace
> I'm sexing raw-dog without protection
> Disease-infested. ("I Shot Ya," Mr. Smith, Def Jam Records, 1995)

What could I possibly learn from Trina who boasts about "fucking" a married man in "Da Baddest Bitch?" She raps:

> See I fuck him in the living room while his children ain't home
> I make him eat it while my period on
> A little nasty ho, red-bone but a classy ho. ("Da Baddest Bitch," Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000)

Finally, what could I possibly learn from Lil Kim who places herself in competition with another woman for a man's affection in "She Don't Love You?" She raps:

> Does she do it like me…
> Do she handle it like she got a deep throat
> I mean suck that cock 'til she start to choke
> Does she like to have sex high off the X
> Try it with me and tell me who's the best. ("She Don't Love You," Notorious K.I.M., Atlantic Recording Corporation, 2000)

What could I possibly learn from the texts of women rappers whose own mothers have been quoted expressing their negative reactions to some of their daughters' work? Foxy's elementary schoolteacher mother says she was "really appalled" (Foxy's mother quoted in Burford and Farley, 1999, p. 134) at the Vibe cover that shows Foxy grabbing her breast and crotch. Lil Kim's mother says, "I don't listen to all of her stuff because I can't…My son tells [me] what I can hear and what I can't. He censors her stuff for me" (Lil Kim's mother quoted in Samuels, 2000, para. 9).

Until recently, I avoided analysis of all of the bad girls' representations because I only saw updated versions of the same old hypersexual, gold-digging jezebel images that have plagued representations of black women for years. All eight albums collected dust

while I went about the work of analyzing texts by other women rappers that offered representations that were less problematic. When my focus shifted away from judging women rappers' texts for positive pedagogical messages to uncovering the ways women rappers' representations help me to understand the range of contradictory experiences of black women, I knew that the bad girls had to be included in the dissertation. Their texts are replete with contradictory representations of black women. I still find their representations to be troubling—but now troubling in the sense that their representations unsettle my own outdated Victorian notions about the public expression of women's sexualities. I do not mean to suggest that all of sudden my difficulties with some of these women's texts have disappeared. I still struggle to listen to some of them, and I still consider some of their representations of black women quite problematic. It is my intention to be a thorough, responsible researcher who examines them as carefully as I do other women rappers' texts while making known my struggles with them.

Though I realize that Lil Kim, Foxy, and Trina are unique women, I group them together in this section because they are so often connected by mainstream critics and as a result, similar stories emerge about the three themes that are the focus of this chapter: power, representation, and pedagogy. I begin by offering a very brief biographical sketch for each woman outlining similarities among them, and then I discuss the women in relation to each of the three themes. The issue to which writers in mainstream magazines most often attend in their stories on the bad girls is representation, so it is the theme that is the central focus of my discussion.

Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina

Kimberly Jones, Inga Marchand, and Katrina Taylor have gone through some drama to become the rappers Lil Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina. Mainstream magazine writers report a long list of tragic experiences for all three women: absent and violent fathers, murdered lovers, suicide attempts, feuds with former friends, shootings, and drug addictions. Foxy and Kim were once childhood friends who dreamed of becoming, according to Foxy, the "Thelma and Louise of rap, with the dopest mink coats and the flyest shoes" (Foxy quoted in Burford and Farley, 1999, p. 132). Now the two women are enemies, and their long-running feud resulted in a gun battle leaving one man shot outside a Manhattan radio station in 2001. Earlier this year, Kim was indicted for lying to a grand jury investigating the shooting. The man Trina intended to marry was murdered in a drive-by shooting when she was only 19 years old.

Kim recalls that her father would fight her "like a man" (Kim quoted in Marriott, 2001, p. 133). She says that he called her a bitch during one argument, and he called the police after Kim stabbed him in the shoulder with a pair of scissors during another argument. In her early teens, Kim left home and became a drug courier for crack dealers to support herself. About the experience, Kim says, "I did what it took to survive…I ran errands for drug dealers, lived with them—whatever it took to make ends meet" (Kim quoted in Samuels, 2000, para. 5). Kim's mentor and lover, male rapper Notorious B.I.G., was murdered not long after the release of her first album.

Foxy has reportedly been hospitalized four times for suicide attempts and addiction to prescription drugs (Ogunnaike, 2001, p. 112). Foxy is also accused of assaulting Danyel Smith, who was at the time Vibe magazine editor-in-chief, because

Foxy allegedly did not like the story Smith wrote and published about her (Boehlert & Hendrickson, 1999, para. 1). Foxy attributes the absence of her father to her subsequent problems in relationships with men. She says, "I thought it was normal for a guy to mistreat me. My father wasn't there to show me the right way" (Foxy quoted in Burford and Farley, 1999, p. 76). In addition to her mostly absent father, Foxy says that her "number-one insecurity" is her dark skin, which prompted at least one family member to say to her, "Oh my goodness, you're so black!" (Foxy quoted in Burford and Farley, p. 76). She describes a change in attitudes across time and in herself:

> If you take any beautiful dark-skinned sister nowadays, guys are like, 'Oh, she's beautiful.' But back in the day, it was not the cool thing. That was just something I had to get over, because for a while I couldn't stand myself. (Foxy quoted in Burford and Farley, p. 76)

I re-tell the drama of these women's lives not to sensationalize it but to show what mainstream magazine reporters tend to include in their stories about these women. Their coverage includes discussion of catfights, drive-by shootings, absent black fathers, abusive black lovers, and crack—mainstream periodicals situate these women in stereotypical black ghetto life. Associating these women with typical urban black male narratives—specifically feuds that escalate into shootings which then turn into court cases, fellow rappers constructed as competitors and rivals, and the selling of illegal drugs—may lend these women street credibility with their audiences. These women's troubled personal lives may prompt their fans to conclude that their raps are indeed authentic, and as a result, these women's stories may resonate with black women who experience similar tragedies, hardships, and violence. I do not identify with most of the events of these women's real-life stories and with many of their stories on wax, but I

recognize a sadness in their quoted comments about their personal struggles. For example, when Ogunnaike (2001) asks Foxy to discuss her addiction to prescription drugs and her failed engagement, she responds, "It's too painful for me to even go there" (Foxy quoted in Ogunnaike, p. 112), and when Toure (1998/1999) asks her if being a rapper is all she dreamed it would be, she laments:

> Not at all…Basically Kim and I used to be in the house just dreaming—'We're gonna be like Roxanne Shante and Salt-n-Pepa; we're gonna have all the guys and the money and the fame.' Now I got the platinum Rolie and the Benz 600, and I had the illest nigga alive. But it ain't all it seems to be. It's not. (Foxy quoted in Toure, para. 19)

Perhaps I am projecting my own sadness about their stories onto them; after all, these women can now enjoy material luxuries, remove themselves from crime-infested neighborhoods, earn more than enough money to support their family, and hire skilled attorneys to negotiate their way out of legal problems—all privileges most black women living in the ghetto do not have and do not get a chance to earn. Nevertheless, their personal growing-up struggles are familiar stories to many black women, even though their wealthy lifestyles are not. For example, Lil Kim's admitted struggle to love herself even to the degree that she changed her flat chest, black hair, and brown eyes to breast implants, blond hair, and blue eyes has the potential to resonate with us all. She says:

> I have low self-esteem and I always have…Guys always cheated on me with women who were European-looking. You know, the long-hair type. Really beautiful women that left me thinking, 'How can I compete with that?' Being a regular black girl wasn't good enough. (Kim quoted in Samuels, 2000, para. 7)

Kim's "not good enough" feelings about her black girl-ness is a theme that will be addressed in Chapter 6.

Power and Representation

I place my discussion of power and representation into one section for Lil Kim, Foxy, and Trina because the two issues are so intertwined in their stories as performers. Relative to Missy and Eve, the three women do not seem to have enough control of their performer personas to make a change from the initial highly sexualized, male-fantasy driven images that were created for them at the beginning of their careers. All three women gained entry into the rap industry through their association with a male rapper. Specifically, Notorious B.I.G, Jay-Z, and Trick Daddy were key in launching the careers of Kim, Foxy, and Trina, respectively. Foxy and Kim discuss the heavy influence men had in the shaping of their personas and the lyrical content on their early albums. Foxy explains the control Jay-Z had in the creation of her first album:

> The [first] album, I was sixteen and I didn't have a lot of say. I had all men running my career, telling me, do this, do that. Jay-Z came in and said, you gotta say this, and this how you have to be perceived. It was basically mapped out for me. (Foxy quoted in Toure, 1998/1999, para. 9)

Chris Lighty, CEO of Violator Records, Foxy's label, was another man in control of the direction of Foxy's image and music. When he says, "I knew who I wanted her to be musically" (Lighty quoted in Smith, 2001, p. 124), he puts himself at the center of Foxy's persona. Foxy's mother also comments on the record company's power over the representation of her daughter. She explains:

> I was emphatic with Def Jam [Violator Records' parent company] about how I wanted my daughter to be promoted…In every meeting I told them—and I had discussed it with Inga beforehand—that I would like her to be presented as a sophisticated young woman. But once Inga got behind the mike, I didn't have any control over her. I'm telling her one thing, and on the side [her management] is telling her, 'Fox, sex sells, and you have to do this.' And it's proven to be true—sex has sold. And that's the issue that still sits hard on my chest. (Foxy's mother quoted in Burford and Farley, 1999, p. 133)

Before her second album, Foxy went to record label executives to discuss a change in image, but Foxy says that Lighty refused. She says, "He told me that what I was doing was selling, and that I needed to keep it going. He felt like I had time to change; I was young" (Foxy quoted in Burford and Farley, 1999, p. 134). Lighty speaks of Foxy and her performer persona in commodity terms; in this construction, Foxy becomes a product to be bought and sold. Even though Foxy has discussed a change in image, Burford and Farley maintain that in their interview, she seemed to "waffle" about how she would specifically change. They explain:

> First she tells you, "I want women to be proud of me as a whole—grandmothers, mothers—and I want to change the way I am perceived." Minutes later, she says, "I'm not even going to say that I'm going to change my lyrics, because I'll be going against everything I stand for. And I won't have any of the fans that loved me and supported me through the first four years of my career. My two-plus million fans would be like, 'This isn't Foxy.'" (p. 134)

Burford and Farley leave Foxy little room for contradictions. They set her up in the good girl/bad girl dichotomy, so, of course, she cannot be both, even though the reality of her situation may be better explained outside an either/or dichotomy. They seem to want Foxy to become a good girl. That Foxy seems to be in conflict with herself is much more real and plausible, given the complexity of Foxy's situation. Burford and Farley do not attend to the material effects of a potential change in Foxy's image. Foxy's mention of her "two-plus million fans" suggests that she is well aware of her total number of record sales, and hence, the amount of money she has earned and could lose if she does not stick with the male-defined image prescribed for her when she entered the business.

Lil Kim, also packaged in hypersexual terms, has gained more control of the direction of her music since Notorious B.I.G.'s death. Even though Kim had less control

when she entered the business, she now runs her own label Queen Bee Records. Kim comments on the increasing creative control she has earned with each successive album. She explains:

> Today, I am much more independent and in control of my own career, especially my music. Over the years, I worked with people who tried to influence my musical direction, but on my latest record, La Bella Mafia, I followed my own vision. I stayed true to myself and the music I wanted to make, and I think that is why the fans have responded so well. (Kim quoted in "Five Questions," 2003, para. 1)

Kim attributes Biggie's death to her "growing up" in the music business. She says, "I had no choice but to become a very mature young lady. I kind of made the label give me my own record label" (Kim quoted in Oumano, 1999, para. 25). Especially interesting here is Kim's use of the term lady to describe her process of gaining more control in the business. I say "especially interesting" because Kim's image has been fashioned far left of the mainstream construct of "lady." Also worth noting is her seeming hesitancy—she says "I *kind of* made the label"—in describing the renegotiation package with her record company that resulted in Queen Bee Records. Her seeming hesitancy about dealings with her record company is very different from Missy Elliott who refused to sign a record deal until it came with a label of her own. To Kim's credit, she has branched out to acting and modeling, diversifying her means of income and expanding her fan base, and she has expressed a sense of agency about the trajectory of her career that I sometimes forget in my discussions of these women's male-controlled/defined images. She says:

> Instead of coming out looking like a male to compete with them, I came out looking like a woman and still kicked a lot of they asses. It's like, we had Too Short and we had Snoop coming out, disrespecting the women. Then you had me come out like, 'I'm not having this. I could tell y'all about yourself, too.' Being a woman in this game is just hard. Sometimes we don't get the same amount of money—it's not right. And sometimes we don't get the same amount of airplay.

> I just feel I have so much more to accomplish. I went through a lot of rough times to make it change for the better. I had to go left to come right a lot of times. But I'm becoming a little more content with my position in this game, and I'm ready to go to the moon now. (Kim quoted in Dunn, 2002, para. 5)

Of the three women, Trina is the only one who says she has control over the direction of her career and decisions about her image. She says:

> Ain't nobody gonna make up my mind for me. With my record company, management, and everyone around me, I basically control everything. I tell *them* I'm not gonna wear this, I'm not doing this, I'm not doing that. (emphasis in original, Trina quoted in Kennedy, 2001, p. 144)

I am not sure if I believe Trina. Her performer persona looks very much like other women rappers' hypersexual images, such as Lil Kim and Foxy Brown, who have admitted to having very little control over their image. Perhaps Trina agreed without hesitation to photographers' wishes for her to straddle a blow-up fish with her backside facing the camera barely covered in a bikini for the June 2002 cover of The Source magazine, and perhaps she thought to pose lying in her bed in sexy lingerie—albeit not as revealing as other lingerie she has worn—for a story on her Miami house in the May 2003 issue of Vibe magazine. Perhaps I am projecting again. I want Trina not to have chosen to represent herself in objectifying ways, that is, as sexy centerfold, rather than legitimate woman rapper. Perhaps I too am caught up in an either/or dichotomy of sorts, particularly that legitimate woman rappers cannot assume a highly sexualized persona.

Interesting to note is that all three women connect highly sexualized images with money. In each woman's raps, sex comes with a price; men must give up money and/or luxury material goods if they want a sexual encounter. Writers also tend to mention what these women spend on their own jewelry, cars, clothes, and homes. For example, Burch (2003) does a feature story on Trina's possessions, particularly her house, cars, and

clothes, and what each costs. Yu et al. (2003) report that two of Lil Kim's jewelry pieces worth $250,000 were stolen from New York's Kennedy Airport, and Rogers (2003) reports that $300,000 in cash and property was stolen from Trina's Hilton hotel room in North Carolina. Skinner (2003) tracks the number of times brand names are mentioned in songs, and in 2003, Lil Kim won with the most brand mentions, a total of 14 different references, in her rap "The Jump Off" (La Bella Mafia, Atlantic Recording Corporation, 2003).

All three women situate their tales of money and sex in the streets. Their stories take place in cities, and their raps contain representations linked to poor urban environments, like images of hustling, crime, and violence. Lil Kim maintains that rapping about violence in the streets has made many rappers rich because she says, "That's what our fans wanted to hear" (Kim quoted in Castro, 1997, para. 8). She further explains her "hard-core" image:

> It's hard to rap about something other than people being murdered and crime. We don't want those things to happen…We're just telling it like it is. It may take time before we all start rapping about flowers…I still rap hard-core. (Kim quoted in Castro, 1997, para. 8)

Kennedy (2001) maintains that Trina's freaky rhymes are "borrowed from her wild child youth—things she experienced and tales she heard when she and her girls used to run the streets all night," (p. 143), and she quotes B.B. Lewis of Circle House Studio, the Miami studio where Trina recorded many of her songs, who discusses Trina's street credibility, "She ain't run from the hood…She didn't get rich and switch" (Lewis quoted in Kennedy, p. 146). Foxy proclaims herself "the voice of urban youth in America" (Foxy quoted in Samuels, 1998, para. 13), who raps about what she sees outside of her house in

Brooklyn. All three women in their raps maintain close connection to their respective hoods, presenting familiar urban tales to their audiences.

Pedagogy

Unlike Missy and Eve who comment on their positioning as role models and/or their pedagogical responsibilities to young fans, the bad girls are mostly silent on the issue in the more than 60 mainstream journal articles I reviewed. I found only two short comments by Foxy Brown and her mother in one article about Foxy's role model status. Foxy says, "I have teenage girls who come up to me all the time, like 'Foxy!' and reciting my lyrics, and I'm like, *Whoa—you know what? I need to stop using so much cursing*" (emphasis in original, Foxy quoted in Burford and Farley, 1999, p. 134). But a few sentences later, Foxy decides against altering her style. She says, "I'm not even going to say that I'm going to change my lyrics, because I'll be going against everything I stand for" (Foxy quoted in Burford and Farley, p. 134). Foxy's mother also comments on Foxy's role model status, but unlike her daughter, she hopes that Foxy will change her raps so that they are more kid (and parent)-friendly. She explains:

> I keep telling Inga that she's a role model…She could have so many more fans if she just generalized what she's saying and made it so that parents won't tell their children, 'You can't play that in my house.' Because really, if I had [younger] children, I would think twice before letting them purchase [Foxy's CD]…Yet this little girl has this kind of power. If it's used in a positive way, then she could be awesome. (Foxy's mother quoted in Burford and Farley, p. 138)

Foxy's mother is caught in the positive pedagogy trap. Comments by Foxy's mother suggest that she believes Foxy's raps can be pedagogical only if they contain positive messages and if she cleans them up. She leaves no room for Foxy's raps as they are with

representations of black women that can be unsettling, highly sexualized, and overly materialistic.

Foxy's mother is not alone in passing judgment on the bad girls' personas and texts. In some of the mainstream magazine coverage on these women in particular, writers tend to editorialize or pass judgment on these women's personas (Britton, 2000; Burford and Farley, 1999; Marriott, 2001; Nelson, 1997; Smith, 2001). I did not see this phenomenon in articles on Missy and Eve. For example, Marriott (2001) debates the merits of Lil Kim's "pussy politics" (p. 126) for black women. He asks, "What are the contradictions of using sex as a means to power—or the trappings of power? Isn't 'That Thing' worth more than access to money and car keys?" (p. 139). Burford and Farley encourage Foxy Brown to clean up her image so as not to continue to compromise her personal dignity (and the dignity of black women in general) for monetary gain. Nelson (1997) is the only writer to defend Lil Kim against attack by pointing out that Kim's own abusive family context is a more important issue to discuss in relation to black women than Kim's supposed responsibility to present less problematic images of black womanhood.

Some writers confuse these women's highly sexualized personas with the women themselves. Unlike articles on Missy and Eve, some of those on Lil Kim, Foxy, and Trina inevitably focus on these women's actual sex lives and their bodies, especially Lil Kim's breasts, Trina's butt , and Foxy's dark brown skin. Venable (2002) asks Trina if she is as "freaky" (p. 108) in real life as she is on wax and whether the rumors about her bisexual lover Missy Elliott are true. The title of Green's 2002 article on Trina, "Working Girl," is suggestive of a prostitute. In this article, Green also mentions the

rumors of Trina's bisexuality, describes her "ample pelvic proportions" as "a hit in [Miami], the booty-shake capital of the world" (p. 111), and lists some questions Trina says she is constantly asked about her sex life: "Would you rather do two men or a woman and a man? What's your favorite position? Who gives head first in your relationships?" (p. 111). Accompanying a brief story about Lil Kim's stolen jewelry is a picture of Kim with her diamond and platinum initial "B" necklace; the caption under the picture reads: "Missing: the 'B' that once called Kim's cleavage home" (Yu et al., 2003, para. 1). In a story supposedly about a robbery, Lil Kim's breasts become the center of attention. Mr. Cheeks, a male rapper peer of Kim's who performed with her on the video for her rap "The Jump Off," comments on Kim's "growth" over the years. He says:

> Lil Kim and I came up together…When she was with Junior M.A.F.I.A., I was with the Lost Boyz…I've seen Kim grow…Her hooters have grown lovely…I got much respect for Kim as an artist, but I must say I enjoyed looking at those amazing ta-tas. (Mr. Cheeks quoted in Scaggs and Sheffield, 2003, para. 1)

These are but a few of the examples of mainstream magazine representations of these women that objectify them. In blurring—perhaps obscuring—the lines between person and persona, these articles reduce these women to hot mamas with big tits and bountiful booties, a move that works against their legitimization as skilled emcees. Constructing these women as hot mamas also compromises a conceptualization of them as public pedagogues. Of course, teachers are not supposed to be sexually attractive and desiring figures.

The bad girls' raps have taught me some important lessons. Even though the bad girls tend not to express an intentional pedagogical purpose for their raps, they still are pedagogically important. More than other women rappers, they have helped me to

recognize my own inclination to judge some women rappers' texts rather than remain open to understanding a variety of representations of black women in the discourse of rap. The bad girls' raps are filled with contradictory representations of black women that are often highly sexualized and excessively materialistic. They rap about women in competition with each other, women who sell sex for money from men, and women who smoke weed and tote the ultimate phallic symbol, the gun. These are the same women who claim that they are fiercely independent, strong, outspoken, and smart. The bad girls rap about baaaad women.

My struggles with the bad girls' contradictory representations of black women in their raps are echoed by Britton (2000) in her article entitled "to Kim, with love," a letter in which she points out the problems with labeling Kim's work feminist and empowering. I review the letter because even though Britton focuses on Lil Kim specifically, she articulates the tensions I have felt during my study of all the bad girls. Britton talks to Kim directly (and sista emcees like her), pleading with her (and them) to stop constructing representations that promote so-called pussy power, which she defines as "the literal or figurative use of what's between your legs to get the material things you want" (p. 115) because it only reifies the longstanding gold-digging jezebel representation associated with black women.

Before the actual letter, Britton describes the complicated contradictions of Kim's life and persona. She says:

> Alternately referred to as a hell kitten, Queen Bee, hip-hop's nasty girl, sex symbol, glamour baby, diva ho and disgrace to Black womanhood, the 26-year-old rapper has risen to icon status as an entity that defies simple explanation. She is a self-proclaimed feminist who is a poster girl for plastic surgery; a Black sex symbol who re-created herself to look like a blond Barbie doll; a symbol of

> female sexual liberation and independence who lives with a houseful of men (whom *she* supports) because she has said she's afraid of being alone; a femme fatale who makes men pay for the pooh while still seeking courtship, romance and true love. (emphasis in original, p. 112)

As Britton points out, the series of tensions that are Kim's life and persona are not easily explained. They remind us of our own struggles to negotiate our race loyalty with sexist black men, claim the "feminist" label when we often associate it with a white women's movement, define a beauty aesthetic for ourselves, fashion a sexual identity without objectifying ourselves, support rap music even though much of it constructs black women as gold-digging bitches and whores, and love ourselves enough to walk away from unhealthy and violent relationships. These tensions keep me interested in Lil Kim, and they teach me about the contradictory spaces black women often occupy. Britton maintains that Lil Kim fascinates us. She asks: "Is she the bad girl some sisters secretly long to be? Is it that troubles she sings about are 'authentic'? Or is the illusion of erotic power particularly seductive for women who are victims of racism and sexism?" (p. 112) My answer to all of these questions is yes. To Britton's list of questions, I add the following: Why does Kim's "pussy talk" make us angry or afraid? Why do we sometimes choose silence regarding the contradictions of Kim's persona? Why do we displace our discomfort with hypersexualized images onto Kim and not onto the male executives who are largely responsible for the production of these images?

Britton begins the letter identifying herself as "a young Black feminist" (p. 115); then she adds the description "a female fan who lived, breathed, and died hip hop" (p. 115); and finally she adds to her list of identifiers "a child of the Black Power Movement" (p. 186) who longs for past female emcees like MC Lyte and Queen Latifah.

I include all of these descriptors because they contextualize the tensions Britton feels about Lil Kim and the representations of black women found in her raps. She admits that even though Kim's lyrics may "speak the truth of some young women's realities—hard-core sex, drugs, and the rough street life—they don't empower women in these situations to get out" (p. 115). I believe Britton's comments here diminish the value of Kim's texts. To suggest that Kim bears some responsibility for "empowering" women with her raps is unfair to Kim as an artist. Kim's representations are valuable, even those that are problematic, and to judge them, rather than examine their contradictions, only results in misreadings and incomplete analyses.

Britton continues the letter by pointing to the examples of MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Sister Souljah, women rappers popular in the past who did not reveal their breasts and asses to gain fan support or write rhymes about women demanding that men pay for the pussy. Britton longs for more Queen Latifahs, MC Lytes, and Sister Souljahs in the rap industry today. I, too, hope for more women emcees in the tradition of the three that Britton mentions, but I also question Britton's romanticization of past eras of hip hop, ten years ago, the time during which she says she and other black women "wore the armor of self-love, self-respect and self-actualization, standing together with our men while we did what it took to 'Fight the Power'" (p. 186). Britton does not examine how her own Black Power Movement positioning and ideology affect the ways in which she reads Lil Kim and her representations. To Britton's credit, she does place Lil Kim's representations in a larger "sex sells" American culture. She explains:

> Today we've traded in our shields for Gucci sandals and Vicky thongs. We now stand across from our men pointing hypocritical fingers at their sexism while letting them know that it will cost a large fee to get a piece…We've abandoned

> our self-esteem and self-respect for the iced-out carrots society keeps dangling in our faces. But what did we expect? We are the generation that was spoon-fed Dynasty dreams financed with the trickle-down economics of the Reagan-Bush administrations…so it's no wonder we've computed sex equals money equals power. (p. 186)

At the end of the letter, Britton asks Kim a series of provocative questions about whether or not she felt empowered wearing almost nothing for promotional ads for her first two albums, whether or not Kim's image would be what it is if it were not profitable, and whether or not Kim understands that money does not change feeling exploited. These are all important questions I also have thought about in relation to Lil Kim and her representations. However, Britton never seems to escape a good vs. bad framework based on judgment rather than analysis, for she concludes in the last paragraph of the letter that Kim is "a little girl…in pain…hid[ing] it well behind her blue contact lenses" (p. 186). She pleads with Kim to "conquer the demons that haunt her" so that she can "come out of this hell with [her] dignity intact" (p. 186).

Conclusion

I try to avoid Britton-like expressions of disapproval of the bad girls and their raps. Even though my dissertation focus has shifted toward analyzing women rappers' texts for representations of the many contradictory experiences of black women instead of locating positive pedagogical messages in women rappers' texts, I still struggle to recognize my own participation in an either/or dichotomy when writing about the bad girls. They have taught me to recognize my own tendency to construct myself as the "good girl" researcher, the one who intends to be "thorough and responsible" in her readings of bad girls' texts. Distancing myself from the bad girls through the guise of "thorough and responsible researcher," I sometimes avoid writing myself into my

retelling of their stories. When I write about Missy and Eve, I find stories that are familiar with my own. Hence, I have little trouble weaving narratives about our common experiences and struggles. Integrating the bad girls' stories with my own has presented more of a challenge. I am sure readers will find more than a few instances in which I fall into the "me-as-good-girl" vs. "them-as-bad-girls" judgment trap. In the narrative I construct of their lives, I admit the sadness I feel for the bad girls, a tactic which places me in a superior position to them. I admit to worrying that the bad girls will negatively affect the reaction of my mostly white readers to the dissertation as a whole. I admit that reading these women's daring sexual expressions is sometimes an uncomfortable process, more difficult than reading other women rappers' texts. I am still struggling to locate all of these instances and comment on them.

Analyzing rather than criticizing these women's choices is no easy task for someone who has been schooled in a "lady" curriculum all her life. The hypermaterialistic and hypersexual personas the bad girls often take on disturb long-held notions I have about women, ladies, and expressions of sexuality. During my adolescence, my grandmother was the parent who took responsibility for teaching me how to be a good girl. For her, a girl's goodness hinged on whether or not she had engaged in sexual intercourse. Nothing else mattered. Her directive was unambiguous: Keep your dress down and your legs closed. Good grades, passivity, politeness, deference to elders, conservative clothes—all of these were necessary for lady-hood, but they played secondary roles to a girl's virgin status. Twelve years of Catholic schooling and many more years of Catholic sermons reinforced my grandmother's "lady" curriculum. I probably will never unlearn all of my good girl ways of knowing. My

study of the bad girls reveals that the good girl in me is still very present as I work to make meaning of their texts and personas. I have learned through my engagement with the bad girls' texts that my narrow assumptions about the public expression of women's sexualities are situated in frameworks of understanding that tend to lock women into a madonna/whore dichotomy. I have learned that a range of representations of black women, rather than just a few in keeping with my own ideology, can teach me the most about myself as I work to name and rename who I am.

In the following two chapters, I examine a range of representations by black women rappers resisting dated notions of black-ness and blackwoman-ness to unlayer the complexity and expose the contradictions in their texts while simultaneously examining the context in which (and sometimes against which) they are produced. I move away from my effort to highlight positive representations and ask the following questions in my analysis: What can we learn from women rappers' texts about hip hop generation black women? How do black women rappers represent hip hop generation black women's identities? How are these representations sometimes contradictory? What critiques are black women rappers offering to their audiences about hip hop generation black women's experiences? How do these critiques connect to the historical and contemporary essentializing discourses that have represented black women in static and demeaning ways?

CHAPTER SIX
"YOU A BITCH, I'M A BITCH, WE ALL BITCHES IN THIS MOTHERFUCKIN' GAME": AN ANALYSIS OF THE NAMING PRACTICES OF BLACK WOMEN RAPPERS

Voices

I hear voices. They try to name who I am. *You're not good enough.* They live inside of me challenging my every move. *You don't belong there.* Sometimes I do not hear them; sometimes I refuse them airtime; sometimes they are loud and clear, almost deafening. *You don't matter*. Though they do not have complete control, they have mightily resisted my efforts to silence them. *You cannot compete.* These are the voices that live inside of my psyche, and as I release them onto this blank white page, I feel their power, their power to make my decisions for me, manipulate my thinking, name my reality. *You're not smart enough*. I understand more fully the kind of battle I must wage against them: I now work deliberately to quiet them for longer periods of time. But they still show up. *You're not pretty enough*. These voices haunt me. They are with me every time I sit down to write a paper, look at my reflection in the mirror, ask a question in one of my classes, walk in the affluent neighborhood around the campus lakes, give a presentation at a conference. They are tenacious. They have had years of practice and lots of help in strengthening themselves, given my long time situatedness in this country, what hooks (1989) describes as a white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.

I suspect that I am not the only black woman in America who hears these voices of doubt and fear, voices that often constrain and limit, voices that have grown louder with time to colonize our psyches. That colonization, resulting from a complex system that works to deny our very humanity, makes it especially difficult, sometimes

impossible, for us to define ourselves in ways that affirm our subject positions, our personhood. We have been subjected to a long history of negative images of ourselves reflecting the "dominant group's interest in maintaining black women's subordination" (Collins, 1990, p. 71). In public discourses, others have named us mammies, matriarchs, welfare queens, whores, bitches, gold diggers, and freaks—all are controlling representations used as ideological justification for the continuation of systems of domination over black women, systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class oppression (Marshall, 1996). Framed within a context of racialized sexualization, these negative images have contributed to black women constructed as "all body, no mind" (hooks, 1991, p. 153). hooks says that black women are seen as only sexual and rendered objects, considered incapable of being subjects or active agents in naming ourselves. Though the production of images of blackness in the white imagination remains mostly the domain of privileged white men, black women have resisted (and still do resist) the stereotypical constructions of black womanhood.

Most of us do not define ourselves as others have. Though we have been called out of our names, we have not accepted objectification as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and other sexually derogatory markers. We have carved out spaces in public discourses to speak about our complex identities and in so doing, we have challenged what it means to name and who has the power to name. We have concerned ourselves with building a language to defend our name in public, challenging the underlying power structures of naming and talking back to and against the dominant discourses that have tried to define who we are. It is that act of speech, of talking back, that hooks (1989) says

is “no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice” (p. 9).

What’s In a Name?

Naming is an act of power, especially for an oppressed people who have been denied that right so many times in our history in this country. Former enslaved African Americans changed their master-given names after Emancipation; black nationalists took on Kiswahili names instead of their American names after the Civil Rights Movement; and we as a people, after proposal in the late 1980s by Ramona Edelin, then president of the National Urban Coalition, connected our collective name and a cultural context with the designation African American (Lacayo, 1989, p. 32).

I use naming to mean more than the ascribing of a proper name to a given individual, for as Gilmore (1994) cautions: “Proper names assert an identity and continuity between the self and language, between signifier and signified, and cover over the differences produced by discourse” (p. 87). I use naming to refer to larger, more collective acts of constructing or defining an image. This kind of naming can be an important movement in the process of creation influencing the social construction of a self (hooks, 1989). I do not mean a self that is “unitary, autonomous, universal, and static” as Munro (1998b) points out has “functioned as the basis for essentialized notions of woman” (p. 35). Rather, following Gilmore, I like to think of name as “a potential site of experimentation” (p. 93). Name then takes on the possibility for play, contestation, fluidity, change, multiplicity. To think of naming in this way has political force for black women because we have already been inscribed in very narrow terms by others and even

silenced in public discourses when we have tried to define who we are. What's in a name, then? Smitherman (1977) answers:

> Everything, as we acknowledge that names are not merely words but concepts which suggest implications, values, history, and consequences beyond the word or "mere" name itself. Words fit into a total symbolic and cultural system and can only be decoded within the context of that system. (p. 42)

Drawing upon this notion of naming and its significance for black women in identity creation and contestation, I locate my discussion of naming practice in the context of hip hop culture, specifically rap music. Even though hip hop/rap culture has been labeled "a resisting discourse, a set of communicative practices that constitute a text of resistance against White America's racism and its Eurocentric cultural dominance" (Smitherman, 1997, p. 7), it is still a discourse implicated in white and black men's sexism. And so it is a location especially important for black women to name themselves.

Bicce…Bicge…Bicche…Bycche…Bych(e)…Bytch(e)…Bich…Bitch…

I want to consider the ways in which some black women rappers work with(in) and against dominant sexual and racial narratives in American culture. To do so, I target a small, but significant, group of black women rappers and their texts for close reading and ask myself, what are the complex and contradictory ways that Missy, Eve, Lil Kim, Da Brat, Trina, and Mia X name themselves? In my reading of their texts, I found a striking commonality among them: each of these women calls herself "bitch."[9]

At first, I refused to recognize the complexity of these women's naming practice. I was sure that these were women—young women—who had no sense of history, for if they did, I thought, they would not freely choose to call themselves bitches. I feared that

[9] I purposefully insert quotation marks only once around the word *bitch* to interrupt the patriarchal coding of the word in our collective imaginations.

these black women with their access to such large and varied audiences were only reifying negative stereotypical images of black women. I wondered how they could contribute to—and be complicit with—the already misogynist discourse of rap where most women are "bitches and hos" anyway. I even admitted to myself that perhaps I was not being fair to these women. Perhaps I envied their boldness in naming themselves, a boldness that I did not have, a boldness that would allow me to fight more fiercely against the internal voices that try to name who I am. *You're not good enough. You don't belong there. You don't matter. You cannot compete. You're not smart enough. You're not pretty enough.*

These questions and fears still accompany me as I try to engage in work I know is critical to understanding black women's voices in all our multiplicity. These women's lyrics often present complicated, difficult-to-discuss issues, but my task in writing this chapter is not to resolve these issues or sit in judgment of these women. I do not intend to argue that these women's constructions of black womanhood are unproblematic or even successful attempts to dismantle patriarchy. Instead, I hope to unlayer the complexity, examine the context, expose the contradictions in these women's naming themselves bitch. While I do not choose to wear that appellation myself and sometimes find it difficult to hear these women labeling themselves bitches, I am interested in an interrogation of their naming practice and of its meaning: Why do these women choose bitch to name themselves? What meanings are already inscribed in the term, and what new meanings, if any, do these women inscribe? How are we to describe the material, political, even pedagogical effects of these women's naming practices?

I begin my discussion of these women's re-appropriation of bitch by defining the word formally. In the Oxford English Dictionary, a bitch is defined in obvious gendered terms. As a noun, a bitch is defined as "the female of the dog (fox, wolf, and occasionally of other beasts)," or it is a term "applied opprobriously to a woman; strictly, a lewd or sensual woman. Not now in decent use; but formerly common in literature." When the term is applied to a man, it becomes, not surprisingly because of the power of patriarchy, "less opprobrious, and somewhat whimsical, having the modern sense of 'dog.'" As a verb, a bitch behaves in a "spiteful, malicious, or unfair" manner, "deceive[s] (in sexual matters), or "grumbles or complains." Most of the example sentences in the OED using bitch, provided from texts throughout the centuries to illustrate meaning through context, have women as their subjects, even if the definition could apply to a man. Thus, a systematic layering on of gender is effected, and the word becomes coded in our collective imaginations as behavior and/or attitude, sometimes a sexualized behavior and/or attitude, that is necessarily, mostly though not always, female and woman.[10]

This layering becomes even more complex when a black woman is branded bitch; the designation becomes especially problematic given the history of representing black women in extreme sexual terms, either as the hypersexual Sappho figure or the asexual mammy figure, and the history of associating black women's sexuality with animalistic images. In patriarchal discourse, a black woman is the consummate bitch, a subhuman with an endless sexual appetite always complaining about something. Therefore, to

[10] See Pinar's (2001) contention:

> 'Bitch' circulates as an epithet in a male-male discursive system….Bitch is a term in the male imaginary, and when it is used, regardless of the 'object' to which it presumably refers, it is circulating in a male homosocial system of value and desire (p. 1013).

silence her, to rape her, to oppress her is justifiable, natural, and necessary. That black male rappers readily engage in calling black women out of our name should come as no surprise. Male rap group N.W.A.'s misogyny is apparent in their song "One Less Bitch" (Niggaz4Life, Priority Records, 1991). They rap:

> In reality, a fool is one who believes that all women are ladies
> A nigga is one who believes that all ladies are bitches
> And all bitches are created equal
> To me, all bitches are the same
> Money hungry, scandalous groupie hos!
> That's always ridin' on a nigga's dick
> Always in a nigga's pocket
> And when a nigga runs outta money, the bitch is gone in the wind
> To me, all bitches ain't shit. ("One Less Bitch," Niggaz4Life, Priority Records, 1991)

Sometimes black men are complicit in a patriarchal world that is hostile toward women and responsible for perpetuating images that are designed to oppress us.

Too often black women are blamed for what is wrong in our communities. In sexist raps, we are portrayed as "welfare queens" making babies so we can stay on government assistance or as "gold diggers" who use our sexuality to take black men's money (Kelley, 1996, p. 143). What is left unspoken is that "these sexist raps," according to Rose (1990), "articulate the profound fear of black female sexuality felt by these young rappers and by many young men" (p. 115). Though I am disturbed by sexist and misogynist lyrics, I am not suggesting that they are "simply products of the current crisis in patriarchy" (Kelley, p. 140). African American vernacular traditions have long been sexist as evidenced in such "signifyin(g) practices" (Gates, 1988; Smitherman, 1977) as "the dozens, toasts, and the age-old baaadman" narratives (Kelley, p. 140). Words like *bitch* and *ho* were not imported into African American male vocabulary by

rap music as in N.W.A's "One Less Bitch." According to Kelley, bitch was such a common reference to women in the 1950s that folklorist Roger Abrahams, in his study of black oral culture in Philadelphia, defined it in his glossary of terms as "any woman. As used here, usually without usual pejorative connotations" (p. 141). I do not offer this cultural and historical context to let black male rappers off the hook. It does, however, help me to understand the complexity of name-calling. I still maintain, though, that a man's labeling a black woman a bitch can be a direct form of male domination.

In an effort to challenge this domination, women in the music industry have taken on the re-appropriation of bitch,[11] and I turn to efforts by black women rappers who have seized the term from sexist discourse in an effort to "reclaim the word, harness its power, and reverse its direction" (McDonnell, 1999, p. 83). Before I move forward with my discussion of the re-appropriation, let me make clear that I am not suggesting that all black women rappers feel that in order to be strong and assertive, they must use bitch when referring to themselves. A number of older generation rappers, most notably Queen Latifah, have rejected the term's use in their lyrics, but in the lyrics of contemporary women rappers I reviewed before narrowing my focus, only one, Lauryn Hill, does not use bitch as self-designation.[12] All others do. In fact, one contemporary woman rapper has been especially self-reflexive in her lyrics and in interviews about inverting the unfavorable signification of bitch. Aware of the word's negative

[11] McDonnell (1999) quotes Vibe editor-in-chief Danyel Smith, "Millie Jackson named her 1977 album Feelin' Bitchy, and Meredith Brooks had a hit single with the rock song 'Bitch' in 1997" (p. 83).

[12]I name the older generation of women rappers as those most successful in the late 1980s until the mid-1990s, and they include but are not limited to Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, Salt-n-Pepa, YoYo, and Monie Love. The latest generation of women rappers are those who are currently releasing albums, and they include but are not limited to Missy Elliott, Eve, Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, Trina, Da Brat, Mia X, Queen Pen, Lauryn Hill, and Rah Digga.

connotations and its rampant use by men in hip hop as a "dismissive, generalized epithet for women" (McDonnell, p. 83), Missy Elliott uses it to expose the unfair, sometimes oppressive, nature of her business. Missy takes hold of the word to fashion a different identity for bitches. "I want to be using it [the word *bitch*] in a positive way," she says (Missy quoted in McDonnell, p. 82). Assuming this identity, a woman must be confident and strong if she is to survive in a patriarchal society. Missy explains that a woman rapper has to be a bitch in the hip hop world if she wants to make it:

> I think sometimes you have to be a bitch in this business to get where you want to go. Sometimes you have to put your foot down because this is a male-dominated field. If you don't, people will walk all over you. I think bitch is a strong word. I feel like I'm a bitch in power. (Missy quoted in McDonnell, p. 82)

In another interview, she discusses how "putting her foot down" may be misconstrued by others:

> To other people that may come across as being a bitch, but it's just knowing what we want and being confident. If I'm paying people and they're not handling my business right, I have to check them. 'Cause sometimes you're nice and people don't jump on what they're supposed to do. (Missy quoted in Musto, 1999, para. 4)

I understand Missy's concern with not appearing weak before her male counterparts. Though I do not work in the rap industry, I am familiar with the kind of male-dominated space she describes. As a doctoral student and graduate instructor in a university that has a long history of exclusion, I feel the constant need to assert myself as a producer of knowledge and a speaking subject. Like Williams (1991), I feel that "no matter what degree of professional I am, people will greet and dismiss my black femaleness as unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational, and probably destitute" (p. 95). According to Hammonds (1997a), the hypervisibility of

black women in the academy and the contemporary fascination with what hooks (1992) calls the "commodification of Otherness" (p. 21) means that we find ourselves "precariously perched" in the academy (p. 145). Following hooks and Hammonds, duCille (1994) writes:

> Mass culture, as hooks argues, produces, promotes, and perpetuates the commodification of Otherness through the exploitation of the black female body. In the 1990s, however, the principal sites of exploitation are not simply the cabaret, the speakeasy, the music video, the glamour magazine; they are also the academy, the publishing industry, the intellectual community. (p. 592)

Gender oppression happens in the work spaces we inhabit, whether we choose the rap industry or the academy. *You're not good enough. You don't belong there. You don't matter. You cannot compete. You're not smart enough. You're not pretty enough.* Commenting on the boundaries constructed along gender lines in her business, Missy says that a man does not have to check his behavior or his ambition like a woman does:

> For a guy, though, it's just considered aggressive. You don't hear people call males bitches. But I've heard that people talk that way about Chaka Khan. And Aretha Franklin: If it was cold in the studio, she'd put the mike down and leave. Someone who sees her act like that may say, 'She's a bitch,' but she just means business when she says, 'Yo, please have the heat up when I get there.' (Missy quoted in Musto, 1999, para. 6)

Missy's different meaning of bitch relies on a woman's observable level of confidence and works against dominant sexual narratives that describe bitches as lewd and sensual women and the male-driven hip hop narrative that often describes black women as bitches, also read freaks and whores.

Interestingly enough, Missy says that she must be a bitch only sometimes, noting the necessity of becoming one. As a shrewd businesswoman, she realizes that the identity of bitch is a performance, and she knows when to perform the specific identity of

bitch to get what she desires. She understands the difficulties of being a woman, especially a successful, autonomous woman (more autonomous than many other women rappers), in the rap industry:

> I became a bitch in power because when I walked in, I asked for what I wanted. And at the end of the day, if this is the way I want it, this is the way I'm going to have it. (Missy quoted in McDonnell, 1999, p. 84)

I understand Missy's comments here to speak to larger issues connected to the silencing of black women's voices in public discourses. "Coming to voice," hooks (1989) says, "is an act of resistance" because "only as subjects can we speak" (p. 12). Refusing to be rendered silent, Missy walked into a recording studio, knew what she wanted to do musically, and asked that it be done. She made her desires known, and now as a record producer, she has the authority to demand that others bring those desires to fruition. Taking on the persona of bitch, which she defines as "knowing what we want and being confident," enables Missy to be regarded as a serious woman rapper and powerful businesswoman. When considered within the gender structure of hip hop, defining the label in this way or re-appropriating the term, calls into question the already inscribed meanings of bitch, even if only provisionally, and complicates a monolithic understanding of what it means to be a black woman in the United States.

Reading Between the Lines

To continue my interrogation of the naming practice of Missy, Eve, Lil Kim, Da Brat, Trina, and Mia X, I turn to their lyrics to help me understand the complexity of and contradictions in their labeling themselves bitches. Missy Elliott spends a considerable amount of time on her album Da Real World (Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999) to redefine bitch. In the in-between spaces on the album, or the interludes, she chooses

another woman rapper Lil Kim to rap the lyrics she writes about the self-designation. Missy's choice of Lil Kim to be the voice of her re-appropriation of bitch is not without its contradictions. Kim's rapper image is highly sexualized; some have even argued that it "perpetuates the gold-digging, whorish image that Black women have been trying to kill since slavery" (Britton, 2000, p. 115). While I agree that certain images we choose for ourselves in public spaces reify us as objects, I also am not ready to dismiss those images as unworthy of intellectual interrogation. Those images raise important questions for us to ask of ourselves. "Is Kim the bad girl we secretly long to be?" (Britton, p. 112) Why does Kim's "pussy talk" make us angry or afraid? Why do we sometimes choose silence regarding the contradictions of Kim's persona? "Is the illusion of erotic power particularly seductive for those of us who are affected by both racism and sexism?" (Britton, p. 112) Why do we displace our discomfort with the image onto Kim and not onto the male executives who are largely responsible for the production of the image?

Nicknamed the Queen Bee, Lil Kim proclaims herself the ultimate new bitch; she says in one interlude that she is the "bitch that stands above all bitches." She has attitude and confidence as she talks back to those who "got a problem" with her act of naming. Acting as a gatekeeper of the symbolic space of bitch, Kim specifies some parameters for who can and cannot take on the name. Not everyone is allowed "wearing" privileges. She explains:

> I got a problem I got a problem with y'all motherfuckers out there that got a problem with us callin' ourselves a bitch Yeah, that's right I said it motherfucker bitch what, you see, bitch is a strong word and only strong bitches could use that mother fuckin terminology bitch, I mean if you can't wear the name don't try to use it. Shucks. (Interlude "Throw Your Hands Up" featuring Lil Kim, Da Real World, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999)

In the next lines, Kim invites others to call her a bitch. She is carefully slow in giving directions for mouthing the words *she's a bitch*:

> So when y'all see me in the street this is what I want y'all to do fix your lips, put 'em together nicely and say, say it along now, say it along now, say she's a bitch. (Interlude "Checkin For You" featuring Lil Kim, Da Real World, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999)

I am reminded here of a teacher taking her students through pronunciation drills of unfamiliar words. She guides them through the process concentrating on movements of the mouth so that they sound the name correctly. Kim's focus is also on our mouths. Perhaps unintended, but still layered in meaning, is her instruction to "fix our lips." Directed at men, the call suggests a literal movement of their mouths as they speak the name bitch. Directed at women, however, the call suggests an additional movement, this time movement of our other set of lips. Perhaps the call is for black women to speak through the "culture of silence" (Hine, 1989, p. 912) surrounding black women's sexualities, to take pleasure in and feel empowered by our sexualities. I am seduced by Kim's bold invitation; she is, after all, a black woman inviting us to call her a bitch, which she says is a label of strength. But what else is Kim inviting? Does her open invitation suggest to men, both white and black, that it is okay to name all black women bitches? Are confidence and strength the only markers for this newly formulated bitch identity?

Money, Money, Money…

One theme that emerged as I read and listened to women rappers' texts is the connection between the bitch identity and money, power, and autonomy. I must begin this section with a reading of a rap by Trina because more than any other woman rapper

whose texts I review in my dissertation, Trina fashions a bitch identity for herself on wax that is clearly connected to sex, wealth, and power. Aptly titled Da Baddest Bitch (Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000), Trina's first CD is a collection of hypersexual and hypermaterialistic tales about a baaad bitch, a persona Trina uses to trouble representations of black women in hip hop discourse. In an interview with Kennedy (2001), Trina defines bitch and comments on the different effects of the label when men and women use it. Trina says:

> When you hear males rap about it they're not talking about a diva bitch, they're talking about a bitch in another sense….But when a woman uses that word, it's like empowerment. A bitch is a strong woman who's not going to take no shit. Like a diva. It means control. (Trina quoted in Kennedy, p. 142)

Trina's remarks echo Missy's interpretation of the label; both women connect the bitch identity to a strong woman who resists male domination. On wax, both women also connect the bitch identity to money.

Trina proclaims "I'm da baddest bitch" no less than ten times in her rap of the same name. Over and over again, Trina answers the question "Who's bad?" posed by male rapper Trick Daddy in the chorus of her rap reminding us that no one is more skillful at performing the bitch identity than she. Her repetition of the phrase "I'm da baddest bitch" so many times throughout the rap solidifies her claim. Speaking as an authority, Trina constructs an identity for the baddest bitch. She raps:

> I'm representin for the bitches
> All eyes on your riches
> No time for the little dicks
> You see the bigger the dick
> The bigger the bank, the bigger the Benz
> The better the chance to get close to his rich friends
> I'm going after the big man. ("Da Baddest Bitch," Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000)

She announces a willingness to "represent for the bitches," a strategy that positions her as a voice for a community of women. Trina defines the persona almost solely in terms of money, using representations similar to those that male rappers often employ to depict black women as gold-diggers and whores. Almost immediately, Trina makes her desires known. Even though she says she wants men with big dicks and big bank accounts, access to their money is her primary objective. It is what she needs to become more powerful, to become the baddest bitch. Rich men are important to Trina only to the extent that contact with them affords her the opportunity to use their wealth to her advantage. She says she wants "a blank note to take everything," and she declares her intention to "go after the big man," both suggestive of a desire for something more than just money. Power seems to be the overall goal. Her plan involves the exchange of money for sex. In the last verse of the song, Trina summarizes the process for becoming the baddest bitch. Taking on a pedagogical role, she raps:

> I got game for young hos
> Don't grow to be a dumb ho, that's a no-no
> See if you off the chains
> Stay ahead of the game, save up buy a condo
> Sell the pussy by the grands
> And in months you own a Benz
> Another week a set of rims. ("Da Baddest Bitch," Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000)

I am not sure whether Trina's construction of a bitch identity is in fact a shift away from the derogatory meanings inscribed by male rappers. Her advice to young women "to stay ahead of the game" includes a directive to sell the black woman's body, an especially problematic representation, given the long history of objectifying black women in public discourses. Even though the bitch persona Trina performs exudes confidence and

strength, I am not convinced that it also represents a woman in control, a key marker for a re-coded bitch identity.

In a rap of solidarity with other women entitled "All My Bitches" (Unrestricted, So So Def Recordings, 2000), Da Brat describes herself as a bitch who "wakes up from dreaming of money, to thinking of money on a daily basis." Da Brat celebrates the material benefits of her rap success: a black Jaguar, a Porsche, a condominium, and vacations in Morocco. She raps:

> It's a fact that,
> Brat the first solo
> To go plat,
> And if it sound like I'm braggin
> I am, cause I'm proud of myself,
> Pat a bitch on the back
> Damn…straight to the bank I go
> Created a game plan
> That y'all follow. ("All My Bitches," Unrestricted, So So Def Recordings, 2000)

Some may be hasty in concluding that Da Brat's boasting is in keeping with the theme of excess that sells records in American culture, particularly in the rap industry (Boyd, 1997). Some may even consider her listing of the commodities she has acquired as placing value on herself only in terms of what she owns. These conclusions may indeed hold some merit. But I think we also need to keep in mind the economic realities facing black women in this country, "a lack of employment opportunities available for young women due to race and gender segmentation in the labor market" (Kelley, 1996, p. 143). Able to propel herself out of poverty through rap, Da Brat enjoys a degree of financial independence, something that more black women should be able to claim when they work hard at their jobs.

Trying to be a player in an industry that valorizes "getting paid," Missy Elliott, together with Lil Kim, also defines the bitch identity in terms of material wealth:

> See it's two types of bitches in the world
> You got a broke bitch, you got a rich bitch
> That would explain what I am and what my girl Missy is
> We da rich motherfuckin bitches that's right. (Interlude "Checkin For You" featuring Lil Kim, Da Real World, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999)

In a move not without its contradictions, she equates the bitch identity with money that results in a confluence of race, class, and gender. I think it is necessary to understand the identification with money against patriarchal discourse and practice that has treated, imaged, and legally defined black women as property. In these women's connection between bitches and money, black women are in control of property; they have the power to use wealth. However, defining the identity of bitch in terms of wealth seems to me to also set up a split between women, a separation between those who are rich and those who are poor. *You're not good enough. You don't belong there. You don't matter. You cannot compete. You're not smart enough. You're not pretty enough*.

Interestingly enough, Kim does not go any further in describing the persona of a broke bitch; instead she focuses her attention on the rich ones, those she understands to have power. Women with money are valued; women who are poor are devalued. Some may argue from this evidence that Kim and Missy are creating yet another discourse—among many—which silences poor black women, rendering them unimportant and worthless. However, I propose that we keep in mind the complexity of the context in which women rappers speak. Perhaps Kim and Missy are talking back to male rappers who often portray black women as gold diggers or privileged white men who have been

responsible for the economic disenfranchisement of black women. Lil Kim raps about surviving the game:

> What, that's right see only bitches like us is allowed to play a game of chess, you see a real queen needs a king You damn mother fuckin right I don't want no nigga layin up under me that can't do for me What I can't do for my mother fuckin self. (Interlude "Checkin For You" featuring Lil Kim, Da Real World, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1999)

Typically considered a game for men to play, chess becomes in these lines symbolic of life in the rap game. Women who have earned money of their own do not need to have men around for financial gain, and they prefer partners who are independent and strong, just like they are. Perhaps knowing all too well that women are often reduced to object status and even sometimes constructed as non-entities in the rap industry, Kim and Missy use the language of capitalism as leverage for claiming a space of power owned by women. They utilize the universal language of their business in the creation of a space of play, of contestation, between men and strong, powerful women.

"Fuck Old Susanna, I Totes"

A second theme to emerge is that sometimes in naming themselves bitches, women rappers re-appropriate the gangsta persona popularized by a number of male rappers.[13] The gangsta, according to Boyd (1997), is an oppositional image rooted in "poverty, marginality, and phallocentrism" (pp. 61-62). He is the "proverbial bad nigga, feared by all around him" (p. 62). A gangsta is supposed to be "hard," and in order to be hard, he must maintain "a state of detached defiance, regardless of the situation" (p. 62).

[13] It is useful to point out here that the gangsta persona is already a re-appropriated form of the gangster in American popular culture. The gangster in film has been especially prominent. The gangster genre, according to Boyd (1997), focused on the underworld society populated by those who openly resisted the laws of dominant society and instead created their own world, living by their own rules. Boyd discusses the Godfather films as examples.

Gangsta rappers weave tales supposed to depict real life in the hood; rappers like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and 50 Cent tell "highly stylized narratives of gang culture" (p. 64) in which "excess and oppressed Black masculinity are expressed symbolically through an exaggerated phallus, high-powered weaponry, and the ability to kill at will" (p. 67). "Masculinist narratives" often invoking the imagery of crime and violence, gangsta raps are "verbal duels over who is the baddest motherfucker around" (Kelley, 1996, p. 121). These are the raps that are often the most misogynist.

Appropriation of the male persona, which involves "women's adaptation of items, customs, and behavior traditionally associated with male culture" (Keyes, 1993, p. 208), is not new to the community of women rappers. According to Keyes, the earliest women rappers like Sparky Dee and Roxanne Shanté appropriated dress styles, vocal timbre, and stylized speech behavior similar to hardcore male rappers of the time. Following Keyes, I maintain that women rappers sometimes must "adopt a male aesthetic" (p. 208) if they are to gain and keep male and female audiences for their songs. In other words, only a limited number of images are open for women to access in a commodified culture controlled by men. Freccero (1999) explains the limited representational options for women performers. She says:

> I want to discourage analysis of [cultural productions] that assumes that any individual woman is completely free to choose from among any number of equally available representational choices and exploit any one of them, that those choices are freely made, and that therefore each individual is responsible as an individual for the choices s/he makes in terms of how s/he will be represented in the culture. (p. 52)

One result of a commodified culture controlled by men is that women rappers connect the gangsta and the bitch personas in their performances. Eve and Mia X are especially

skillful at connecting the two. Significant to my discussion of their lyrics is to understand that for a while, Eve and Mia X were the lone female members of all-male rap crews, the Ruff Ryders and the No Limit family, respectively. Most often, but not always, Eve and Mia X take on the gangsta bitch persona in songs they perform with male rappers in their crews.

Playing against the Southern lady stereotype, Mia X locates herself squarely in the hood ready to protect herself. She raps:

> Mama Mia southern girl fuck old Susanna, I totes
> Two blocks and rocks of camouflage bandanna
> I keeps them on cock when I'm riding through the hood
> Cause soldier haters live for plottin something no good. ("Don't Start No Shit" Mama Drama, No Limit Records, 1998)

Even though Mia X positions herself in the South, she is no Mammy, a docile servant always eager to serve the will of the Master and Mistress of the plantation. Mia X calls herself "Mama," armed and prepared to fight those who dare to start trouble with her. Proclaiming herself the "Rockafella rap guerilla, blonde bombshell bitch" in her song "Philly, Philly" (Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999), Eve too remains loyal to the streets that "stay shouting [her] name."

The streets are dangerous places, products of post-industrial urban decay (Boyd, 1997; Kelley, 1996; Rose, 1994). These women must situate their personas here if they are to show how tough, strong, and fearless they can be. Another setting would not work as well. As is typical of male gangsta behavior, Eve and Mia X are prepared to defend themselves against attack with violence. They are bold and unafraid. Working within phallocentric ideology, Mia X and Eve, not surprisingly, look to the gun as their source of power and strength. Aside from its symbolic reference to the phallus, the gun is also a

very real, sometimes necessary, source of protection against the dangerous environment facing people (especially women) who actually live in the projects.

Though these women may never totally free themselves from the discourse of the gangsta that depends on violence as a measure of masculinity, they do manage to use the gangsta bitch persona as a space for contestation of traditional images of black women in gangsta raps. As gangsta bitches, they refuse to be victims of race, class, and gender oppression, and in so doing, become what Kelley (1996) calls "dangerous agents" (p. 139). In her song "You Don't Wanna Go 2 War" (Unlady Like, No Limit Records, 1997), Mia X performs with the four most successful male rappers on the No Limit label: Master P, who controls the label, C-Murder, Silkk, and Mystikal. The men use their flow time in traditional gangsta fashion to boast about their violent and sexual adventures; they rap about "breakin bread with muthafuckin killas," "pullin a hit off in the daytime without being seen," and "hos awaitin [their] arrival" ("You Don't Wanna Go 2 War," Unlady Like, No Limit Records, 1997). Mia X, in contrast, plays with several traditional gangsta themes and images. Mia X feminizes her gun, uses images associated with war and drug-dealing to describe her verbal ability as an emcee, challenges competitors to lyrical battles, and pledges lifetime loyalty to her crew. Her lyrics are worth quoting at length:

> Mama! Four star lady general, picture the tank
> I represent, get ya bucked, and I ain't to be fucked with
> Nigga, lyrical, lyrical, ghetto she-devil
> Below the sea level (New Orleans) chills the illest sista
> Quick to get ya tangled in my web of gangsta pictures
> Descriptive vocals, who's the black widow I flow to
> Red Sea, flooded the rap in the streets, started the week
> And got my props in and out of bloody cheddar cheese
> Betta keep yo negativity about No Limit on the under

> My verbal warfare will shake that ass like thunder…
> There is no street bitch, rollin with niggas
> Flowin with niggas, holdin they own with niggas
> Like Mama Mia, and her kid sista
> Lady Smith and Wesson, 9 milli-heata splitta
> Forever with the Tru soldiers till I die
> We gon ride, smoke weed, and drop lyrical keys. ("You Don't Wanna Go 2 War," Unlady Like, No Limit Records, 1997)

In these lines, Mia X uses familiar themes and images associated with male gangsta culture to become a tough gangsta bitch, but she also manages to feminize the persona with images of female reproduction. Mia X utilizes a number of images suggestive of menstruation like the Red Sea, bloodiness, flooding, and flowing, which function to mark a woman-identified gangsta bitch. In connecting images of reproduction with descriptions of a woman who announces she "ain't to be fucked with," Mia X protects the (lyrical) fertility of "Mama." From a position of strength, she is able to boast about her rhyming skills. Including images of fertility, Mia X transforms the space on the microphone typically constructed by male emcees as the site in which they battle to "kill" the competition with their rhyming ability. Mia X reconstructs the space as a birthing place for her "flowing with niggas" and "drop[ping] lyrical keys" and a space of camaraderie—rather than competition—with the male soldiers in her crew.

Unlike Mia X whose gangsta bitch celebrates metaphoric violence/rebirth on the microphone, Eve weaves a tale in which her gangsta bitch shoots, robs, and kills for a living. Reminding us of Jada Pinkett-Smith's character from the film Set It Off who is the lone survivor of four black women bank robbers, Eve's bitch in the song "We On That Shit" warns her victim to do exactly as she says:

> Pretend I'm Jada, lata set it off
> Cartier, Rolley, time frozen get em all

> Dingling medallions, all that glisten is mine
> And all that bitchin that you doing
> I got cha kissin this nine
> Ya'll niggas worse than bitches, tears in your eyes
> I ain't got no sympathy so if you scared, nigga cry. ("We On That Shit," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

Humiliating her victim, she condemns his visible display of fear when she points a gun to his face. She questions his masculinity when she calls him (and niggas collectively) "worse than bitches," a move that draws attention to the gendered, derogatory connotation of the label. The gangsta bitch in Eve's rap blames the man for the robbery, making him responsible for her violent acts. She raps:

> On your knees, face in chest, lips shut
> Fuck the mask, we're robbing you in lipstick and wigs, what?
> Yeah we brawl, but you took me out and let me see it all
> Braggin bout the shit you got and now I get it all
> Matter of fact, take your clothes off, I like it when they're bare
> Everything from iceberg to silk Dolce underwear, come on. ("We On That Shit," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

Though Eve's casting a woman in this role does not subvert the current distribution of power between men and women, it is an important representational shift, given the traditional gendered discourse of the gangsta who boasts about his skill at getting over and getting paid and who takes violence against women for granted. In an interesting inversion of the objectifying male gaze of the black female body, the woman gazes back at the man's naked body. In Eve's scenario, the man deserves payback for objectifying women. The gangsta bitch chastises the man for paying too much attention to her butt. If he had not been "distracted by the size of [her] ass," he would not have to "sit back and watch [her] take everything." She is determined to "get it all."

Eve's selection of the black woman's butt as the focus of this man's gaze may not be a random choice. According to Rose (1994), the black woman's butt has an "especially charged place in the history of both black sexual expression and white classification of it as a sign of sexual perversity and inferiority" (p. 167). In male rappers', as well as in some female rappers' videos, the black woman's behind is often severed from the rest of her body. She is regularly objectified as a collection of body parts with her butt the primary target for display. These rappers participate in what Rose calls the "video meat market" (p. 169). So when the man in Eve's song is made to suffer in part because of his consumption of the woman's ass, Eve is in dialogue with male rappers' sexual discourses and in dialogue with the larger discourses of patriarchy. Eve also has her gangsta bitch speak to the economic disenfranchisement of working-class women as a possible reason for the robbery. The black woman in the song has to take the man's material possessions in order to survive. She says:

> I'ma get it all
> Used to ball with your niggas
> Now I'm making you crawl across the floor
> Ego crushed and I don't give a fuck
> Small change to the range, heard what I said
> Give it up
> I know it ain't right,
> But me and my bitches gotta eat tonight
> And every night from now on, get it right
> Why, why ask why?
> I'm simply living and I get what I want. ("We On That Shit," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

In these last lines, Eve represents the gangsta bitch differently from the male gangsta, typically a loner only concerned with himself and "gettin mine." Though the gangsta sometimes finds community with other gangstas, that bond is constantly being challenged

(Boyd, 1997). The woman in Eve's song does not intend to keep all the material gained from the robbery for herself only; she intends to share some of it with her women friends. The woman looks out for women other than herself, and she labels these women bitches also.

Sistas in the Hood

A third theme to emerge is that some women rappers take on a bitch persona in community with other women rappers. They create a bloc of bitches. As an example, Mia X and Gangsta Boo join Foxy Brown in her rap "BWA (or Bitches With Attitude)."[14] All three women rappers weave tales in which they connect the bitch identity to the streets and to other black women. They define the bitch identity in terms of a gendered, racialized, and classed solidarity among young urban working-class black women. By linking her bitch persona with other women, typically women who are products of the hood, not necessarily living in the projects, each woman rapper creates "an imagined community of women" (Davis, 1998, p. 57).

Foxy names the trio of women in "BWA" the "three bitch mafia," and each woman takes a turn to tell a story that illustrates her toughness in surviving life in the streets. Foxy boasts about her "case for spitting in a motherfucker's face," a reference to a real-life incident in which Foxy allegedly spit in the face of Vibe magazine editor Danyel Smith because she did not like the story Smith wrote and published about her. Mia X, who labels herself "A street bitch bout street shit/They ain't no additives in this bitch," situates her legendary persona alongside other bitches in the street. She raps:

[14] See also "Gangsta Bitches" (Scorpion, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 2001) in which Da Brat and Trina join Eve to rap as a collective of bitches.

A certified hairdresser, Mama Mia
Known on the streets for drama
When my bitches meet some heat, they call Mama
And I'm coming, gunning everything up in my way. ("BWA," Chyna Doll, Violator Records, 1999)

From a similar position, Gangsta Boo explains how her crew of bitches is feared in the streets. She raps:

Gangsta Boo be wit it, what the fuck you trying to do?
Your Power Ranger crew scared of us
We thought we told you, we coming through tearing clubs up
Bitch in the reins yelling hit a motherfucker
And give her the damn thangs. ("BWA," Chyna Doll, Violator Records, 1999)

All three women rappers fashion a collective bitch identity through an identification with other bitches in the streets.

While Da Brat raps alone in "All My Bitches" (Unrestricted, So So Def Recordings, 2000), she too takes on the bitch persona in community with other women, but she does so with her women listeners who label themselves bitches. In call-and-response fashion in her rap "All My Bitches," Da Brat issues a shout-out to her fellow bitches; "Where my bitches at?" she asks. She responds to her own question, "You a bitch, you a bitch, I'm a bitch, we all bitches in this motherfuckin' game. Just be a bad bitch when you be a bitch." Da Brat positions herself in relation to other women whom she knows are autonomous, smart, and strong. She raps:

All my bitches
That live the hood life,
The good life,
My bitches
That don't need
A nigga for shit
Bitches wit a
Game plan
Rockin name brand,

> I dedicates this one to you. ("All My Bitches," Unrestricted, So So Def Recordings, 2000)

Eve also sends a shout-out to all kinds of bitches. In the rap "My Bitches," (Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999), Eve pays homage to various kinds of bitches including those who "take care of they kids," "stay in school," and "keep a job" as well as those who "smuggle drugs" for their men.

Conclusion

When women rappers link the bitch identity to the hood and use it as a term of endearment, they do so with(in) and against the tradition of black men "ascribing new, potentially empowering meanings to nigger" (Kelley, 1996, p. 137). The revisioning of the word *nigger* into *nigga* speaks to, says Kelley, "a collective identity shaped by class consciousness, the character of inner-city space, police repression, poverty, and the constant threat of intraracial violence fed by a dying economy" (p. 137). The nigga identity does not speak to an African American collective identity. Rather, the nigga identity is gendered and classed and coded as male, and many male hip hop critics regard the revisioning a political act by black men (Boyd, 1997; George, 1998; Kelley, 1996; McLaren, 1999).

Do we grant black women rappers' revisioning of bitch similar status? I do not want to dismiss some women rappers' claiming the label bitch as merely a reifying of the worst stereotypes of black women. Their expressions are more complicated than that. These women rappers have written texts that celebrate black women's multiplicity. I value their expressions. These women are necessary voices in a racist and patriarchal society. They are especially necessary to women like me who hear voices: *You're not*

good enough. You don't belong there. You don't matter. You cannot compete. You're not smart enough. You're not pretty enough.

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE RAP ON SEXUAL DESIRE, SEXUAL POLITICS, AND BLACK LESBIAN SEXUALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SEXUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN RAPPERS

Back Talk

I come from a family of women with big butts. Yes, that's right. Butts. The women in my family have big round, noticeable butts. Butts with presence. Butts that command attention. Bold butts. Butts that have character, have life. Butts that make putting on jeans long, hard work. Butts perfect for walking, for strutting, not for sitting. Butts that are an icon of excitement. The women in my family have sensual, sexual butts, real seats (!) of desire. But I have no such butt; in fact, I have never owned one, and I am becoming more and more doubtful that I will ever grow one. I do not expect you, my reader, to understand this dilemma; after all, you are probably white, so, of course, you too do not have a real butt, a butt of style and quality, like the women in my family have. You cannot possibly understand the value of such a butt to a black woman, especially a black woman who has been—and continues to be—in relationships with black men, who, of course, love big, beautiful, bootylicious butts.

Why do I occupy space with all of this (back)talk? In the spirit of white patriarchy and black men's sexism, I begin below the waist of black women intentionally. The value I place on black women's butts is a result of a long history, a long, racist past in which African people were reduced to black bodies and labeled uncontrollably libidinous. The association between the black body and carnality in the white imagination is reflected in hundreds of years of iconography (Gilman, 1989). The historical collection of representations of black women as animalistic, loose, hypersexual,

dirty, incapable of sexual morality, diseased, prone to prostitution, aggressively sexual—the list of constructions goes on and on—has often been used as ideological justification for systems of domination over black women: systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class oppression (Marshall, 1996). Black women's sexualities[15] are ideologically situated between race and gender, where the black woman sexual subject is often rendered invisible and voiceless (Hammonds, 1997b). At this juncture, which Hammonds describes as "a point of erasure" (p. 177) and which Crenshaw (1992) describes as "a location that resists telling" (p. 403), black women are often prevented from re-inscribing negative images and crafting sexually empowering narratives.

Instead, we are left with images that do us immeasurable harm. Within the "normalizing"[16] assumptions of heterosexism, being a black woman signals the "wild, out-of-control hyperheterosexuality of excessive sexual appetite" (Collins, 2000, p. 129). Black women are (mis)represented in this system as the hyper-Other: a sexual deviant comparable to an animal (Walker, 1981, quoted in Collins, p. 135). These negative sexual images of black women are, of course, still prevalent in public discourses. We only need to turn on the television, open a magazine, listen to a song, or go to a movie to discover the multiple ways—sometimes subtle, sometimes not—in which the media objectifies black women as a collection of sexual parts. Thus, my severing of the black

[15] I am making a conscious effort to use the plural term *sexualities* to emphasize the multiple ways black women perform sexuality.

[16] Collins (2000) defines the normalization of heterosexuality:

> Assumptions of heterosexuality operate as a hegemonic or taken-for-granted ideology—to be heterosexual is considered normal, to be anything else is to become suspect. The system of sexual meanings associated with heterosexism becomes normalized to such a degree that they are often unquestioned. (p. 129)

woman's butt from the rest of her body at the beginning of this chapter is not so surprising given this historical and contemporary context.

That I even have the courage to speak about matters regarding the sexual is surprising. Until very recently, I did not think of myself as an embodied, sexual subject. In fact, the sexual was something apart from my other subjectivities, something I located behind closed doors, something about which I dared not speak. Raised in large part by my grandmother, my very Catholic grandmother, who took in young, pregnant, unmarried women whose families sent them away from home to have their babies, I was taught that the sex act was wrong. With these "experienced" young women as my example, I was warned at an early age that sex was capable of ruining my future. As a result, I equated sex with sin and shame. My grandmother and mother did not have conversations with me about sex, but I knew my grandmother's directive all too well. *Keep your dress down.* Nothing else. She kept the gendered curriculum very simple. *Keep your dress down.* Of course, her warning was well-intentioned, but I live with the legacy of sex as taboo, of sexuality as something to be repressed, of its submergence into private spaces, into silence. I now understand that the silence in my own family about expressions of sexuality is part of a larger and longer legacy of silence enshrouding black women's sexualities.

This heritage of silence in public discourses has been traced back to the enslavement of African Americans. In response to assaults upon black sexuality, according to Hine (1989), a "politics of silence" (p. 912) arose among black women in the years following enslavement. To defend against pervasive charges of immorality and sexual promiscuity, black women, especially those of the middle-class in the black

women's club movement, "reconstructed and represented their sexuality through its absence—through silence, secrecy, and invisibility" (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 266). Black women reformers often worked to regain black women's value and status by advocating that black women embody norms of femininity set by the white colonizing imagination (hooks, 1998). Black women reformers' adherence to Victorian ideology, as well as their self-representation as "super moral," according to Hine (p. 915), was perceived as "crucial to the protection and upward mobility of black women [and] to the attainment of respect, justice, and opportunity for all members of the race" (Higginbotham, p. 266).

As a consequence of this history of silence, we have a very narrow view of black women's sexualities in public discourses (Hammonds, 1997a). According to hooks (1998), black women are still "marked by shame" and plagued by "nineteenth-century black female obsessions with bodily cleanliness, repression of the erotic, [and] denial of sexual presence and desire" (p. 69). These efforts to "counter notions that black females were inherently licentious, driven by animalistic sexual cravings which could not be controlled" have never left us (hooks, p. 69). According to Hammonds, we still tend to emphasize the restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of sexuality while underanalyzing pleasure, exploration, and agency. Spillers (1989) points out that the history of silence has at least two faces; either black women are creatures of male sexual possession, or we are reified into the status of non-being. Room for self-defined sexual identity exists in neither alternative (Rose, 1994).

For a very long time, I embraced silence as my mode of comfort against questions of my own desire and sexual autonomy. No exchange of words. No *re*-membering of

experience. I was trapped in what Audre Lorde (1980) calls "tyrannies of silence" (p. 20), silence that she says women must wage war against through language and action. I do not mean to suggest that I suddenly feel free to speak about my sexual subjectivity. However, I am now involved in work that affords me relatively safe space in which to question taken-for-granted notions about black women's expressions of sexuality. As I read and write, I find myself attracted to a body of work by women, namely black women rappers, who construct texts about sexual matters. Their work becomes especially significant when considered against the backdrop of historical silence about black women's sexualities and the racist and sexist imaging of black women as either sexual objects or animals (Walker, 1981, quoted in Collins, 2000, p. 135). Seduced by women rappers' boldness in claiming space to speak their sexual desire, I too am carving out a space in public discourse as I write about, with, and against the voices of my multilayered gendered curriculum: *Keep your dress down.*

To claim written space for a discussion of black women's expressions of sexuality is no easy task for me. Situated still in a "politics of silence" (Hine, 1989, p. 912), I hesitate to speak about that which I was taught not to speak. How do I confront the fear, shame, and shyness I feel as I write about women's and men's bodies, erotic desire, and sexual independence? How do I work against the "good-girl-if-you-don't, bad-girl-if-you-do"[17] construction embedded in my psyche? How do I speak through the silences? It is a complex and difficult process, for as hooks (1998) reminds us, "Every day of our lives, black [women] are assaulted by images of ourselves constructed by the white racist/sexist imagination" (p. 73). She says that the shame we feel as a result of these

[17] hooks (1998) labels "good girl/bad girl" as the "madonna/whore" dichotomy.

images has yet to be fully named. Representations of our bodies have often worked against us. Almost always framed within a context of "patriarchal, pornographic, racialized sexualization," our bodies have been (mis)represented as sites of domination and conquest (hooks, p. 67). hooks maintains that the totality of our received body image, our inherited body politics is always that of bondage—the body taken over, stripped of its own agency and made to serve the will, desire, and needs of others. Through this writing, I hope to become involved in the fight with other black women theorists to "reclaim the body—the maimed, immoral black female body—which can be and is still being used by others to discredit [us] as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects" (Hammonds, 1997b, p. 178).

What happens when a black woman talks back to that image of herself? In these moments, black women engage in an act that has been mostly forbidden us in public discourse. hooks (1989) describes the act of back talk:

> In the world of the southern black community, "back talk" and "talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion…. To make yourself heard if you were a girl child was to invite punishment, the back-hand lick, the slap across the face that would catch you unaware, or the feel of switches stinging your arms and legs. To speak then when one was not spoken to was a courageous act—an act of risk and daring. (p. 5)

So when we speak to the stereotypical images of black women as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, whores, bitches, freaks, and gold diggers, we are also speaking back to the underlying power structures, and by extension the people in control of those power structures, responsible for the production of images of black women.

Reading Between the Lines

I rely on black women rappers' lyrics to help me interrogate the sexual stereotypes often associated with black women. I am particularly interested in how sexuality and power converge in the sexual representations of black women in their raps. Because I agree with Rose (1994) that "black women rappers' central contestation is in the arena of sexual politics" (p. 147), I bring her contention with me into the curriculum field to make the claim that the curriculum arena is also a location in which these women are pedagogical on matters of black heterosexual politics. I understand black women rappers to be public pedagogues, and in the following pages, I consider how they enact pedagogies[18] around representations of power and black women's sexualities.

I locate moments in the lyrics of black women rappers that demonstrate how they "school" their audiences about black heterosexual and lesbian relationships. Specifically, in my reading of lyrics by Missy Elliott, Eve, Mia X, Queen Pen, and the bad girls Foxy, Trina, and Lil Kim, I identify representations that speak to three themes: sexual desire, heterosexual politics, and black lesbian sexuality. In my reading, I discuss how these women rappers communicate black women's sexual desire and pleasure in the heterosexual sex act; how they link power, money, and sexuality in expressions of black women's sexual identities; and how they queer the space of hip hop by offering representations of black lesbian sexuality.

As I consider the complexity of these women rappers' sexual expressions, I ask myself: What do these women have to say about sex, sexuality, and control over black

[18] I intentionally use the plural term *pedagogies* to note that its "use is important to signify the multiple approaches and practices that fall under the pedagogy umbrella whereas rely[ing] on the singular form is to imply greater unity and coherence than is warranted" (Gore, 1993, cited in Daspit, 2000, p. 165).

women's bodies? How do these rappers articulate black women's sexual desire? How do they communicate in their lyrics, if at all, black women's resistance to sexual objectification, sexual oppression, and even sexual violence in relationships with black men? To what extent do these women rappers affirm patriarchal notions of sexual roles of male and female lovers? Do some lyrics ever move out of heterosexist discourse and make room for queer readings and/or offer representations of black lesbian sexuality?

Keep Movin': Sexual Desire and Pleasure

One theme that emerged in my examination of the sexual representations in black women rappers' songs is their focus on women's pleasure and sexual satisfaction in the heterosexual sex act. In this section, I discuss several raps that feature women who boldly communicate their sexual desires, make the first move in sexual encounters with men, and insist on oral sexual gratification from men before engaging in sexual intercourse with them. A few songs even have women declaring that men are totally unnecessary for women's sexual pleasure. The women in these songs articulate narratives centered in female sexual pleasure. Contradictory, shameless, and explicit, these women's open sexual expressions are much different than my own passivity regarding sexual matters. As the women characters in many raps speak boldly about their desire for sexual gratification from a male lover, I am more acutely aware that I feel trapped by conventional notions of sexuality and pleasure. I am most familiar with silence, repression, and shame rather than openness, agency, and freedom. I do not mean to suggest that women rappers' expressions are always unproblematic, sexually autonomous and empowering narratives. I discuss some raps with women characters that are more focused on pleasing men, and I maintain that these representations reflect

difficulty in communicating woman-centered sexual desire and pleasure. They seem unable to escape traditional patriarchal male-female roles in heterosexual relationships that define women in terms of their capacity to serve the will and sexual desires of men.

Though I have seen a "growing sexual freedom in [women's] rap, an increasing willingness on the part of [women] rappers to display and address issues of their own bodies and sexuality" (Goodall, 1994, p. 85), I realize that these women work in an industry where sexually explicit lyrics are most often big money-makers. So what seems like uninhibited, independent sexual expression may actually be a marketing strategy to sell more records. After all, as Burford and Farley (1999) conclude about the rap industry, "it pays to be nasty" and "there's money to be made in the profane" (p. 72). Even so, these women's lyrics, though sometimes conflicted, raise important questions about control over black women's bodies and expressions of black women's sexuality.

The woman in Missy Elliott's rap "Sock It To Me"[19] (Supa Dupa Fly, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1997) takes charge of her sexuality and actively seeks out a male sexual partner. Inverting the traditional male-female roles in heterosexual courtship patterns, she resists waiting for a man to pursue her and chooses instead to make the first move toward a sexual liaison. The woman in the song is not a passive player in the heterosexual courtship game. Rather, she is in control of the timing of the heterosexual encounter. She says:

> I was looking for affection
> So I decided to go,
> Swing that dick in my direction
> I'll be out of control

[19] hooks (1992) mentions Aretha Franklin's refrain "sock it to me" in her classic song "Respect," which reminds me of Missy's rap.

> Let's take it to perfection
> Just you and me. ("Sock It To Me," Supa Dupa Fly, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1997)

Missy's choice to have the woman make the first move runs counter to my own gender-coded curriculum that taught me that young women should work hard to become "respectable ladies" who remained passive in heterosexual relations. I was not supposed to call a boy, visit his house, sit too close to him at mine, or go someplace by myself with him after dark. To speak my desire, and certainly to act on it, was absolutely forbidden. Good girls did not do such shameful things. They kept their dresses down and stayed quiet. Definitely not a good girl by my grandmother's standards, the woman in this song claims her desire and decides to act on it. In doing so, she speaks through the historical silence surrounding black women's sexualities, and her audience is reminded that women are sexual beings who desire sexual pleasure. Even though Missy says she will be "out of control," she represents a woman who seems very much in control of deciding the terms of a sexual encounter. She tells the man what to do with his penis, specifically to swing it in her direction. Missy's representation of black female sexual pleasure begins with a woman who takes charge and then decides to let herself go (out of control) to experience the sexual pleasure she desires.

Missy's choice to have this woman seek out a man's penis is not without contradiction. Perhaps she is responding to black male rappers' constructions of women as commodities, our bodies available for men's sexual consumption. In severing the black man's penis from the rest of his body, she is able to possess him, and by extension, his power. The woman demands that the man, now the object of desire, fulfill her sexual fantasies. Or perhaps Missy's move is a playful gesture, one with serious intention, to

remind us of the more familiar pattern in men's rap that exhibits black women's bodies as a collection of sexual parts. Though resistant on some levels, the lyrics do not escape phallocentric ideology or heterosexism which privilege the phallus as the ultimate source of power, and they only redirect objectification toward the male body, not do away with objectification altogether. Consequently, the black body is objectified and dehumanized as it has been many times before in contemporary popular culture. Though the song is not totally successful at subverting racist and sexist imaging of the black woman as "out of control," read "hypersexual and wild," the song still is a valuable expression by a black woman about heterosexual matters. The woman in "Sock It To Me" makes a conscious choice to seek sexual fulfillment, and she defines the terms of the sexual encounter:

> I can take it like a pro and you'll know
> Do it long bro with a back stroke
> My hormones are jumpin like a disco…
> And all you gotta say is that Missy go
> And when you say it though I want it moved slow. ("Sock It To Me," Supa Dupa Fly, Elektra Entertainment Group, 1997)

Perhaps unintended but still significant is the connection between movement and sexuality in this set of lyrics. Not a new theme in black music in general and in black women's music in particular, mobility, whether real or imagined, is especially meaningful to a people whose movement has historically been limited or denied altogether.

In her work on early twentieth century women blues singers, Davis (1998) locates a thematic coupling between a woman's ability to move and her ability to exercise autonomy in her sexual life:

> For people of African descent who were emerging from a long history of enslavement and oppression during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sexuality and travel provided the most tangible evidence of freedom…. For women especially, the ability to travel implied a measure of autonomy, an ability to shun passivity and acquiescence in the face of mistreatment and injustice and to exercise some control over the circumstances of their lives, especially over their sexual lives. (pp. 67, 74)

The woman in Missy's rap is similar to black women blues singers who, in their efforts to "redefine black womanhood as active, assertive, independent, and sexual, urged women to 'keep movin,' movement which did not necessarily mean a territorial change" (Davis, p. 75). Davis suggests that to keep moving also meant action or a woman's ability to go forward and act in the world, to resist and survive mistreatment in a sexual relationship. Refusing to be confined by conventional notions of sexuality and desirability, the woman in Missy's rap is also active. Movement is emphasized as she describes the sex act and her role in it.

In similar fashion, movement figures prominently in Mia X's rap titled "Sex Education" (Mama Drama, No Limit Records, 1998). Mia X creates a teacher persona through which she performs a black female sexuality that works against silence, passivity, and shame in the open expression of heterosexual desires. Through a fictional persona, Mia X boasts about her sexual prowess. She highlights motion in the sexual performance. In fact, she says she is in control of moving the sexual act toward its climax. She raps:

> Mia, that southern diva
> Keeps you hotter than grandma's heater
> Be the one you call when you want your toes to curl
> From my up and down, and my round and round
> But remember I'm a rodeo girl
> And I fulfill your dreams, I know you know what I mean
> Legs spread like 9:15

> I rip this thing so mean, bout it bout it, no doubt
> Have you sweating like a Jane Fonda workout. ("Sex Education," Mama Drama, No Limit Records, 1998)

Had I engaged in similar sexual expressions (or sexual expressions of any kind), my grandmother's worst nightmare would have come true. I would have been labeled "ruin't." Uninhibited and frank about sexual desire, the woman Mia X creates in her rap is the kind of woman I was cautioned against becoming if I hoped to be "marriage material." I grew up believing in the myth of the "Lady," whose worth depended on supposed restraint, purity, and inaccessibility. The Lady was who I was taught to become.

Mia X's performance of a black female sexuality does seem bold in its sexual explicitness, but it is not without its contradictions. Mia X's sexual expression here seems in keeping with racist and sexist representations of black women. First, she describes a sexual encounter in which she is not an equal partner, and in keeping with heterosexism, Mia X places emphasis on pleasing the man, never even mentioning her own desires. Male desire, not women's, is the impetus for the sexual encounter. At the beginning of the song, she declares herself "The best teacher/Certified in opening wide, guaranteed to please ya," and she ends with similar phrasing, "I aim to please/And all my students come back" ("Sex Education," Mama Drama, No Limit Records, 1998). The language here suggests commodification of the woman's role in the sex act; she performs a service with a (money back?) guarantee. The language also draws attention to the black woman's body as easily accessible, available, and thus sexually deviant (hooks, 1992). Significant to this representation is Mia's pedagogical persona. That she "aims to please" is, interestingly enough, in the context of her image as teacher. A "dutiful daughter"

(Munro, 1998a, p. 272), she is patriarchy's exemplary teacher placing the (sexual) desires of the Father—before her own. Her male sexual lover, whom she calls "Daddy"[20] at one point in the song, matters more in the pedagogical (and sexual) space.

Foxy Brown also places more importance on fulfilling men's sexual fantasies in her rap "Candy" (Broken Silence, Def Jam Recordings, 2001). Like Mia X, Foxy performs a black female sexuality that does not always resist racist and sexist representations of black women. In her rap, Foxy directs men's attention to her body—and by extension the black woman's body—which she says tastes "just like candy." Her efforts to "catch his eye" by "showing a little cleavage, licking her lips, adjusting her tits, and switching her hips" create a sexualized scene in which the body parts of the black woman become the objects of the male gaze. She raps:

> When my dark skin complexion steps in
> Won't take no questions to get him and uh
> The thought of Fox give men erections
> To get real stiff at the site of my tits
> Now we can role play
> You be the pilot, I'll be the stewardess
> Boy, I ain't new to this
> When I lay on my stomach or throw my legs back
> Y'all probably won't know how to act. ("Candy," Broken Silence, Def Jam Recordings, 2001)

Foxy creates a lyrical sexual fantasy that invites the male gaze by placing emphasis on the visual appeal of specific body parts. Calling attention to her dark complexion and her breasts, mentioning her expertise in laying on her stomach and throwing her legs back, and accepting the lesser role in the pilot-stewardess dichotomy, Foxy performs a black female sexuality that is centered in the objectification of the black woman's body and in

[20] I am reminded here of early twentieth century blues women singers who also often referred to male lovers as "Daddy" in their songs.

the satisfaction of male desire. The woman becomes the Dark Continent[21] upon which men can stake their (erect) claim. Foxy's invitation to the nameless man in the rap—suggestive of an invitation to male listeners in general—to "imagine [her] nude, stretched out…nipples all out, bent over the sink with [her] panties in [his] mouth" does not evoke the beauty and sensuality of black women's bodies but reinforces the stereotypical representation of black women's bodies as territories to be penetrated, occupied, and ravaged by men. Foxy's representation reminds me of the images of black women in male rappers' videos, those that Rose (1994) describes as a "virtual meat market" (p. 169) of black women's bodies.

Not until the last few lines of the rap does Foxy's performance of a black female sexuality position women differently. She raps:

> I'm real sweet like a candy corn
> I'm in your thoughts late night when your boys are gone
> Picture me, t-shirt, no panties on
> Or maybe topless, homie, I'm priceless boy
> The kind of girl that love to talk shit
> 'Specially when I'm on top
> The whole show stop. ("Candy," Broken Silence, Def Jam Recordings, 2001)

Even though she directs men's attention to her naked body once again, she proclaims her "priceless-ness" and boasts of her skill when in the "top" position. This shift is the only time in the rap "Candy" that the black woman is constructed with a measure of sexual agency. "When I'm on top, the whole show stop" suggests a black woman who is more of an equal player in the sexual liaison, perhaps one who is more in control of her own sexual pleasure. Perhaps this moment in Foxy's rap is too little, too late to overcome the

[21] See E. Frances White's Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability (2001).

repeated objectification of the black female body as "eye candy" for men, but it should not be overlooked as an important reminder of the ongoing struggle between black women and men for control of black women's bodies.

I now turn to a discussion of two raps that express more woman-centered narratives of sexual pleasure. Missy Elliott's "One Minute Man" (Miss E…So Addictive, Elektra Entertainment Group, 2001) is all about a woman who makes her sexual desires known. Focusing attention on her own sexual satisfaction, the woman in Missy's rap says she wants nothing to do with men who are quick to orgasm. She wants a man with staying power, one whom she insists must "come prepared" to handle whatever she "throws" to him. Intent on "keeping him up all night," the woman invites the man "to show [her] what [he's] got" and "give [her] some more." In other words, the man must impress her with his sexual prowess and prove himself worthy to be considered her sexual partner. In this interesting inversion, Missy places the woman's desires ahead of the man's, and she empowers the woman to claim sexual pleasure on her own terms. A representation of a woman whose desires matter more in a heterosexual liaison is uncommon in rap discourse.

Missy wrote the song to include a male rapper's performance, and in the original version, Ludacris raps a verse taking on the persona of a mechanic. He is a full-service sex technician. Calling himself "an all-nighter" capable of "shooting all fire," he brags about the effects of his virility and stamina on women. He claims to be able to make women "so wet that they body start to leak" and to make them "see stripes" after sexual encounters with him. Posing as the ultimate fuck-all-night-big-dick black man, a familiar construction in male hip hop discourse, he distances himself from the men for whom the

woman in Missy's song has no sexual desire. Ludacris calls these men "one minute fools" who cannot understand why women do not want to have sex with them.

Missy's rap "One Minute Man" forces Ludacris to engage in familiar boasts about a black man's extraordinary sexual prowess. But Missy places Ludacris' performance in the rap after her two verses and just before the ending chorus in which she declares over and over that she does not want a one minute man, placement which could be read to suggest that Missy is prompting Ludacris to defend his persona against charges of sexual inadequacy. If read in this way, Missy, a black woman, calls into question black male rappers' representations of black male sexuality and forces Ludacris to reconstruct black masculinity. Exposing one woman's dissatisfaction with "one minute men," Missy creates a rupture in hip hop discourse that tends to privilege male sexual satisfaction.

Missy creates an even more significant rupture with her song "Toyz" (This Is Not a Test, Elektra Entertainment Group, 2003). Singing instead of rapping in this song, Missy declares that she does not need her man anymore for sexual fulfillment because her sexual toys please her much better. She asserts that all women must get a toy for their own sexual enjoyment in the chorus of the song. She sings:

> A toy, every girl must have a toy
> The way it make you feel
> Every girl has a toy now, baby
> A toy, every girl must have a toy
> The way it make you feel (Uh, c'mon). ("Toyz," This Is Not a Test, Elektra Entertainment Group, 2003)

In the introduction to the song, Missy says she will remain unaffected even if her lover decides to "hit every chick on the block" because "she gon be alright once [she] turn this power on." On cue after this line, a small motor sounds, suggestive of a

vibrator. In the first and second verses, Missy criticizes her man's sexual performance ("You don't get the job done when I need a little loving") and refuses to engage in sexual intercourse with him ("Don't come waking me up, cause I ain't giving you nada"). Missy's representation here is of an independent woman who chooses not to depend on a man to fulfill her sexual needs. Confident in herself and her toy, she says, "It works for me and lasts longer than the battery." In the third verse, she sings:

> I used to wish that you would love me
> And fantasize on how we we used to be
> Until I discovered something better than you
> I don't need, no need, need your loving
> You wanna come home late at night
> Touching and feeling all over me
> But I don't need no help in pleasing me. ("Toyz," This Is Not a Test, Elektra Entertainment Group, 2003)

Missy's performance is of a woman who no longer romanticizes her heterosexual relationship and instead recognizes the realities and limitations of it. Unhappy with the terms of her current relationship, she chooses to abandon the ideals of love with her male partner, but she is unwilling to sacrifice her own sexual pleasure. A desiring subject, she is content to love and please herself. In the outro to the song, Missy dismisses her male lover from her bedroom and her life. She says:

> How could I miss you baby
> I didn't even know you was gone
> It's obvious you aren't needed in the bedroom anymore
> I'm just keeping myself occupied like all women do when they are taking a bath
> And when you leave, make sure you don't slam the door because you fuck up my concentration. ("Toyz," This Is Not a Test, Elektra Entertainment Group, 2003)

Missy's image of a strong, sexually independent woman in this song complicates how black women are typically represented in hip hop discourse. The image speaks back to constructions of black women that objectify, degrade, and confine rather than

humanize, respect, and liberate. Missy's representation resists the familiar stereotype in rap discourse that casts black women as passive players in matters of sexual desire, in other words, the tendency in hip hop discourse to represent black women as important only to the extent they act in the (sexual) service of men. An important rupture in patriarchal discourse, Missy's song calls into question how black women are most often represented in rap discourse and teaches us how to represent black women who are in control of and define the terms of their own sexual pleasure.

"Precariously Perched": Heterosexual Politics

I group another series of lyrics together around the theme of heterosexual politics, so my focus in this section is on how women rappers link issues of sexuality with issues of power in their lyrics. In other words, how do women rappers articulate representations of a negotiation of sexual power relations with black men? This set of lyrics is angrier, more resistant, less passive than those that communicated women's sexual desire and pleasure. The women rappers seem to have less difficulty expressing the frustrations, fears, and struggles of heterosexual black women. I sometimes wonder how mutually empowering, healthy, and loving relationships are even possible between black women and black men in this country; they sometimes seem doomed before they even begin. Rose (1994) quotes from Cornel West's interview with Stephanson (1988) in which he describes the complicated intimacy between black women and men:

> The pressure on [African] Americans as a people has forced the black man closer to the black woman: they are in the same boat. But they are also at each other's throat. The relation is internally hierarchical and often mediated by violence: black men over black women. (West in Stephanson, 1988, quoted in Rose, p. 149)

Black women are "precariously perched" (Hammonds, 1997a, p. 145) in heterosexual relationships. In a space of intersectionality, "the dual positioning of women of color as women and as members of a subordinated racial group renders [us] vulnerable to the structural, political, and representational dynamics of both race and gender subordination" (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 112). With financial freedom that most other black women do not enjoy, women rappers are able to voice some of the vulnerabilities black women face at one time or another. The raps I have chosen for reading deal directly with the oppression, sometimes violence, many black women experience in heterosexual relationships. Enlightening pedagogy, the raps offer advice to women and warnings to men, which converge around questions of power and sexuality. Rose (1994) further describes these songs:

> These raps are not mournful ballads about the trials and tribulations of being a heterosexual woman. Similar to women's blues, they are caustic, witty, and aggressive warnings directed at men and at other women who might be seduced by them in the future. By offering a woman's interpretation of the terms of heterosexual courtship, these women's raps cast a new light on male-female sexual power relations and depict women as resistant, aggressive participants. (p. 155)

Blending themes of women's pleasure with sexual politics, Lil Kim's rap "Not Tonight" (Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996) is a complicated performance of a black woman defining the terms of sexual pleasure and negotiating her positioning in a heterosexual relationship. Lil Kim tells the story of sexual encounters with two fictional male partners, Jimmy and Rondu, both of whom Kim concludes are less than satisfactory lovers even though they provide her with expensive jewelry, clothes, and cars. Kim begins with her vignette about Jimmy. She raps:

I know a dude named Jimmy used to run up in me
Nighttime pissy drunk off the Henny and Remy
I didn't mind it when he fucked me from behind
It felt fine 'specially when he used to grind it
He was a trick when I sucked his dick
He used to pass me bricks, credit cards, and shit
Suck him to sleep, I took the keys to the jeep
Tell him "I'll be back," go fuck with some other cats
Flirting, getting numbers in the summer
Hoe hop, raw top in my man's drop. ("Not Tonight," Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996)

Characterizing Jimmy as a "trick" places Kim in the position of prostitute who performs sexual services that please him, specifically fellatio and anal sex, in exchange for drugs, credit cards, and access to his car. All the while, however, Kim admits to using the material possessions given to her by Jimmy to seek out attention from other men. In the narrative, Kim has Jimmy pay her with the things she values, but he is not what she wants in a sexual partner. She describes how few times Jimmy's sexual performance was satisfying. She raps:

Then this homey Jimmy, he's screaming "Gimme"
Lay me on my back, busting nuts all in me
After ten times we fucked, I think I bust twice
He was nice, kept my neck filled with ice
Put me in Chanels, kept me out nice. ("Not Tonight," Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996)

Up to this point in the rap, Kim constructs an all too familiar image of the black woman in rap discourse: the gold-digging ho, a woman who is involved with a man only to the extent that she can gain access to his money. Kim's representation is indeed problematic, but she flips the script at the end of her story about Jimmy. She raps:

It was something about this dude I couldn't stand
Something that coulda made his ass a real man
Something I wanted, but I never was pushy

> The motherfucker never ate my pussy. ("Not Tonight," Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996)

Kim's narrative in these lines reveals a woman who is more in control of defining the terms of her sexual relationships. She makes known her sexual desires, questions Jimmy's manhood, and dismisses him because he does not (perhaps cannot) satisfy her. Kim assesses Jimmy's manhood by privileging her own desires. What she wants is of more value than the material possessions Jimmy can afford to give her. Following Kim's declaration is a chorus of women singing: "I don't want dick tonight/Eat my pussy right." An important shift in rap discourse, a black woman chooses to define sexual pleasure by refusing the Big Black Dick, so often constructed by male rappers as irresistible to all women. She defines a black woman's sexual identity based on what the woman desires, not in reaction to what men want.

Kim constructs a similar story about Rondu, whom Kim also eventually dismisses because of his inadequate sexual performances. Kim raps:

> The sex was wack, a four stroke creep
> I jumped on his dick, rode his ass to sleep
> He called next week, asking why I ain't beep him
> "I thought your ass was still sleeping."
> He laughed, told me he bought a new Path
> Could he come over right fast and fuck my pretty ass?
> I'll pass, nigga, the dick was trash
> If sex was record sales, you would be double glass. ("Not Tonight," Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996)

In this narrative, even Rondu's mention of his new car is not enough for Kim to agree to a sexual hook-up with him. He is a joke as a lover. Kim not only ridicules the sexual act with Rondu, but she criticizes his penis specifically. Calling it "trash," Kim attacks the image on which black male rappers often hang their manhood in their songs, a move by

Kim that calls into question the supposed power and potency the black penis represents. Kim ridicules and rejects it in favor of the fulfillment of her own sexual desires. She raps:

> The only way you seeing me is if you eating me
> Downtown taste my love like Horace Brown[22]
> Trying to impress me with your five G stones
> I give you ten Gs, nigga, if you leave me alone. ("Not Tonight," Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996)

In an interesting script reversal, Kim proposes to pay Rondu ten thousand dollars if he leaves her alone, a sum that totals more than the worth of Rondu's jewelry, which he used to try to seduce Kim. In these lines, Kim constructs a more powerful position for the black woman; she defines the terms of the relationship. Nothing Rondu has to offer, including his flashy shows of jewelry, entices her. Her body is not for sale.

Kim concludes her rap by explaining the larger meaning of her story. She raps:

> The moral of the story is this
> You ain't licking this, you ain't sticking this
> And I got witnesses, ask any nigga I been with
> They ain't hit shit till they stuck they tongue in this
> I ain't with that frontin shit
> I got my own Benz, I got my own ends, immediate friends. ("Not Tonight," Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996)

Kim is explicitly pedagogical in this last verse that explains the "moral" of the story. Connecting issues of women's sexuality and capital, Kim teaches us the significance of money in relationships between black women and men. Kim connects her ability to define the terms of a sexual relationship ("You ain't licking this, you ain't sticking this") with her ownership of material wealth ("I got my own Benz, I got my own ends"). Using her position of power in a heterosexual relationship, she refuses to compromise her

[22] In this line, Kim is referring to the 1995 song "Taste Your Love, a celebration of oral sexual pleasure, by R&B singer Horace Brown.

sexual desires, and she prioritizes her pleasure over her man's in her performance of a black woman's sexuality. The black woman represented in this way can choose not to have sex in exchange for money, cars, and jewelry.

Kim chooses to end the rap with representations similar to the ones she constructed in the story about Jimmy in the first verse. She raps:

> Me and my girls rock worlds of big niggas
> Fuck for car keys and double digit figures
> Good dick I cherish, I could be blunt
> I treat it like it's precious, I ain't gonna front
> For limp dick niggas that's frontin' like they Willy
> Suck my pussy till they kill me, you feel me? ("Not Tonight," Hardcore, Big Beat Records, 1996)

Perhaps Kim is unwilling or unable to dismiss the familiar gold-digging image of the black woman and the hypersexual braggadocio common in male rappers' constructions of black female sexuality. Perhaps Kim uses these images to gain her audience's attention long enough so that she can include representations that rupture the patriarchal discourse of male rappers. In any case, Kim's representational choices are pedagogically significant. They expose the fragility of the images male rappers most often use to represent black manhood in their raps; they sometimes reify and sometimes resist the demeaning sexual stereotypes often used to represent black women in rap discourse; and they support an intersectional framework for understanding representations of race, gender, and class tensions in heterosexual relationships between black women and men.

Lil Kim is not the only black woman rapper to construct representations of black women's sexuality that are complicated by issues of money and class. Foxy Brown performs raps that represent black women willing to engage in sexual intercourse with men only if they are paid in some way. I select Foxy's rap "I Can't" (Chyna Doll,

Violator Records, 1999) in particular for review because she is explicit about her intention to "school" or teach women audiences what to do to make heterosexual relationships work to their benefit.[23] Foxy insists that women negotiate—perhaps dictate—the terms of a sexual encounter so that it becomes a means to a woman's financial gain.

In her rap "I Can't," Foxy cautions women against falling for men too quickly and giving in to their sexual advances because she says women risk losing power in the relationship. She warns women about the games men play to gain control over them, specifically promising marriage to trick women into sleeping with them. Maintaining that men "game a lot," Foxy offers a game plan of her own for sexual relations with men, which includes a long list of luxuries that she expects they provide, such as Christian Dior handbags, Prada shoes, diamonds, and license plates that read "Property of Mahogany Brown," a name Foxy gives to a persona she sometimes assumes on wax. Foxy insists on ownership of the car she is given and wants that ownership labeled on the license plates, a public notice that the car belongs to a black woman.

Foxy's plan for sexual encounters with men is largely based on a black woman's ownership of property. Foxy's use of the phrase "Property of" can be read as a moment in which the construction of black women as commodities, as objects to be bought and sold, is called into question. Positioning the black woman in her rap as an owner of expensive items, Foxy represents her as "a chick with her own, nice tits, nice ass." Foxy's construction links a black woman's sexual freedom to her financial stability.

[23] Other women rappers express intent to teach women that a sexual encounter can be a means to their financial gain. See also Queen Pen's "Pussy Ain't For Free" (Conversations with Queen, Motown Records, 2001) and Trina's "Da Baddest Bitch" (Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000).

Foxy's lesson is clear: a woman who has her own money is more powerful in heterosexual relationships than a woman struggling to make ends meet. A woman with money does not need a man for financial security because she has already achieved financial independence for herself. Not having to depend on just any man for monetary support, she has a greater degree of autonomy in choosing a sexual partner. Assuming the role of teacher, Foxy raps directly to women audiences:

> Pussy is power—let me school you, girl
> Don't get up off it til he move you, girl
> And let no playing nigga rule your world and screw you girl
> I got em hating me
> I throws the pussy down, keep em chasing me
> Basically, niggas game a lot,
> So bet I game back, and I change the plot. ("I Can't," Chyna Doll, Violator Records, 1999)

I am not sure how to read Foxy's "Pussy is Power" message. Foxy's representations that connect a woman's site of sexual pleasure with power can be read as ruptures in the phallocentric discourse of male rappers; however, her construction of the black woman's pussy as a mode of currency for access to a man's expensive things reifies male rappers' representations of black women as scheming gold diggers.

My attempts at reading Foxy's text result in more questions: How is a working-class black woman supposed to negotiate Foxy's brand of pussy politics that depends so much on a woman's access to material wealth? Is Foxy's brand of pussy politics yet another construction of the black woman as jezebel, whose body is an object for sale? Can Foxy's pussy politics ever really "change the plot" of patriarchal hip hop discourse that privileges a male-over-female hierarchy in the representation of heterosexual partnerships?

Women Loving Women: Black Lesbian Sexuality

Even though the women rappers' lyrics to which I have reacted thus far are valuable expressions that show negotiations of and struggles for power by black women in heterosexual relationships, none of them reject heterosexual arrangements altogether. Instead, they reinforce heterosexism. In the homophobic and patriarchal discourse of rap, representations of lesbian and gay sexualities are rare. Yet I am sure such raps are performed more than I am aware, songs which allow for queer readings but are not overt in their representation of lesbian and gay sexual partnerships. I select two songs for review in this section, one that I decode for its possible representation of women loving women and the other that is open in its representation of lesbian sexual identity.

"Love Is Blind" (Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999) is a socially relevant text about the physical and sexual violence black women sometimes experience in sexual relationships with black men. Eve creates a story in which a woman friend is beaten, raped, and eventually killed by her male lover. She addresses her friend's murderer directly in the beginning of the rap:

> Hey, yo, I don't even know you and I hate you
> See all I know is that my girlfriend used to date you
> How would you feel if she held you down and raped you?
> Tried and tried, but she never could escape you. ("Love Is Blind," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

Refusing silence about matters that often are confined to the domestic sphere, Eve uses her rap about an individual woman, whom she labels her "girlfriend," to issue a more generalized public critique of violence against black women at the hands of black men. Eve's comment on her friend's inability to "escape" her lover's domination is suggestive of the difficulties that victims of domestic violence experience trying to get out of

abusive relationships. Asking a series of rhetorical questions directed toward her woman friend but also to all her woman listeners, Eve teaches that love relationships are not supposed to be violent. She raps:

> She was in love and I'd ask her how? I mean why?
> What kind of love from a nigga would black your eye?
> What kind of love from a nigga every night make you cry?
> What kind of love from a nigga make you wish he would die?
> I mean shit he bought you things and gave you diamond rings
> But them things wasn't worth none of the pain that he brings
> And you stayed, what made you fall for him? ("Love Is Blind," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

Eve hints at the dangerous possibilities for women who remain in sexual relationships for the sake of material gain. In Eve's representation, the expensive luxuries that abusive men buy for women do not necessarily give women power but may make them more vulnerable to staying in violent relationships. The woman in Eve's rap does not profit from the gifts she receives; instead, she ends up dead. The connection Eve makes between a violent man and "things" and "diamond rings" problematizes the connection other women rappers often make between money, power, and sex.

In "revenge fantasy" style (Rose, 1994, p. 174), much like black male rappers' revenge fantasies against the police in their songs, Eve levels a verbal attack against her friend's murderer. Her anger escalates into hatred and then finally to murder. She raps:

> See I laid down beside her in the hospital bed
> And about two hours later, doctors said she was dead
> Had the nerve to show up at her mother's house the next day
> To come and pay your respects and help the family pray
> Even knelt down on one knee and let a tear drop
> And before you had a chance to get up
> You heard my gun cock
> Prayin to me now, I ain't God but I'll pretend
> I ain't start your life but, nigga, I'ma bring it to an end

> And I did, clear shots and no regrets, never. ("Love Is Blind," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

Eve does not let her friend's murderer go unpunished. In a show of strength, she makes him pay with his life. Standing up for her friend, Eve stands up for female victims of violence.

At the very end of the song, Eve leaves listeners with questions about the kind of relationship the two women share. Is it a platonic friendship between two black women, two sister friends, women who are not related by blood but love each other as if they were sisters? Or is their love sexual? Whatever the case, Eve is ambiguous about the description, and the possibility remains open for a reading that the two women could have been lovers. She raps:

> Cops comin lock me under the jail
> Nigga, whatever, my bitch—fuck that—my sister
> You could never figure out even if I let you live
> What our love was all about
> I considered her my blood and it don't come no thicker. ("Love Is Blind," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

Eve struggles on a name to describe her relationship with the woman. First, she chooses "my bitch," but she seems unsatisfied with that label and decides on "my sister." Her hesitancy with "bitch" is suggestive of its complicated history in hip hop discourse. Even though women rappers, including Eve herself in other raps, have reclaimed the term and reversed its negative connotations, it remains a loaded term. Women rappers sometimes choose to use it to suggest solidarity with other women, but Eve dismisses its appropriateness in this rap. She seems dissatisfied with its ability to capture the connection, perhaps affection, between the two women. Eve's rap leaves us with questions about the nature of the two women's relationship: Why does Eve struggle to

settle on a name that describes their bond? Why would the man, if he were alive, never be able to understand the love between the two women? Is she hinting at the homophobia and sexism (and misunderstanding) black lesbians often face when they come out to black communities? Why does Eve express anger when the woman tells Eve her "seed was growin from his" and not concern for the safety of her friend and baby? These ambiguous references leave open the reading that Eve represents a jealous lover who exacts revenge on a man who prevented the love between two women.

While Eve's rap "Love Is Blind" may offer space to read in representations of a lesbian relationship, Queen Pen's rap "Girlfriend" (My Melody, Lil Man/Interscope Records, 1997) is clearly about a woman who focuses her attention on other women for sexual pleasure. Queen Pen queers the hip hop space, firmly entrenched in heterosexist representations, with images of women seeking sexual pleasure from other women. The rap, a re-make of Meshell Ndegeocello's "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)" (Plantation Lullabies, Maverick, 1993), features Ndegeocello helping Queen Pen sing the chorus:

> Meshell: Girlfriend, girlfriend, yes I had your girlfriend
> Queen Pen: If that was your girlfriend, if that was your girlfriend, if that was your girlfriend, she wasn't last night. ("Girlfriend," My Melody, Lil Man/Interscope Records, 1997)

The chorus, which is directed at the boyfriend of the woman with whom she has sex the previous night, serves to ridicule the man's sexual ineptitude and showcase the woman's sexual skills. Read against the hypersexual braggadocio male rappers often include in their songs, Queen Pen's chorus deconstructs the privileging of the black phallus in hip hop discourse.

Queen Pen takes on the playa persona, typically a male figure who can "pull" or seduce many women, often without them knowing he is not monogamous. Queen Pen recodes the playa persona[24], which is often used in male hip hop discourse, and carves out a space from which she constructs representations of urban lesbian identity. She becomes a woman playa whose sexual prowess and cunning result in "mad bitches wanting [her]" and "mad niggas just checkin for [her]." In other words, her abilities to "pull you out your closet" garner attention from both women and men. Her game deserves respect because she says she can "pull the flyest chick…and run her all night." Queen Pen boasts about the attention the woman playa receives from other women at the Buddha Bar, a popular lesbian club in New York City. She raps:

> On the Sunday night, she was walking out the Buddha
> I was just chillin, minding my own business
> Sitting on the corner, waiting for my sister
> When she slid by, maybe four or five times
> Wanted me to notice the rhythm of her thighs
> Oh boy, girls are just so funny to me
> I can see how niggas get into these beefs
> She knew she had a man when she came up in the piece
> She said she was a regular and how about me
> If she gave me her digits would I call her after three. ("Girlfriend," My Melody, Lil Man/Interscope Records, 1997)

Queen Pen pokes fun at women who try to keep their desire for other women hidden. In exposing their attempts at initiating a sexual encounter with women (on the down low) even though they are already involved in a heterosexual relationship, Queen Pen deconstructs the rigid categories we assign to sexual identity and exposes the instability of heterosexuality. Blurring the line between gay and straight, Queen Pen raps, "It's my business what I do, him or her, he or she, inside you…If I choose to juggle both, then it's

[24] The playa is a hip hop reversioning of the "Mack" made popular in 1970s blaxploitation films.

all on me" ("Girlfriend," My Melody, Lil Man/Interscope Records, 1997). Her vagueness in these two lines could be read as hesitancy in representing a lesbian sexual identity, but the majority of Queen Pen's narrative is taken up with representations of urban black lesbian sexuality.

I am especially interested in the attention Queen Pen pays to the black woman's body in her narration of the flirting scene between women. She does not objectify her in the description "rhythm of her thighs" as often happens in similar stories in hip hop discourse by both male and female rappers about the heterosexual dating game. The description does not feel like objectification but seems to work on a sensual level, almost an echo of a line in Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman." Allowing the black woman's body freedom to move to its own rhythm, Queen Pen resists the usual representations of containment in rap discourse that construct the black woman's body as something to be occupied and taken over by men. Instead, Queen Pen creates a space in which representations of black women's sexualities move out of a heterosexist framework to complicate the already complicated discourse of rap.

Queen Pen joins the other women rappers I have chosen to include in this chapter who have crafted expressions that talk back in multiple ways to the racialized sexual imaging of black women. Sometimes complicit in perpetuating the production of demeaning representations and sometimes resistant to their continuance, the texts which I have read have not always included positive, woman-empowering representations of black women's sexualities. Even though my readings show some women rappers' texts to be contradictory and problematic, the representations they offer are pedagogically

important because they all speak back to the images that have done black women the most harm in public discourses.

GIRL TALK:
AN EPILOGUE

I wrote this dissertation because I believe that black women rappers deserve space in curriculum studies in which their voices are regarded as legitimate, valuable, and necessary and no longer distorted, marginalized, or silenced altogether. Familiar with the curriculum field's propensity toward maintaining whiteness as the only trope of legitimate knowledge and knowledge-production, I recognize an urgent need for scholars of curriculum and pedagogy and popular culture to listen to black women rappers define for themselves complex notions of sexual agency with(in) and against dominant discourses. I bring black women rappers' voices with mine into the space of curriculum theory because I understand curriculum to be what Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman (1995) call "a highly symbolic concept, a site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world" (p. 848). Through their lyrics, black women rappers situate themselves in a public context to forge texts that represent young black women's complex racialized and gendered sexual identities. Together these rappers form a community of women who converse with each other and with their audiences to tell stories that are resistant sometimes and dangerously stereotypical at other times, but I maintain that black women rappers' stories are always valuable.

Black women rappers have created a space in hip hop discourse from which their stories enrich and complicate the public conversation about the representation of black women's identities. My analysis reveals that women rappers are important voices in the public conversation about the collective struggles of black women: our struggle to define ourselves rather than be mis(represented) by others, our struggle for respect and treatment

as peers in male-dominated work spaces, our struggle to express our sexual selves, our struggle against violence by male partners in heterosexual relationships, and our struggle to build community and mobilize ourselves. According to Rose (1994),

> [Black women] rappers' sexual discourse is not simply part of a dialogue with male rappers, but also it responds to a variety of related themes, including dominant notions of femininity, feminism, and black female sexuality. At the very least, black women rappers are in dialogue with one another, black men, black women, and dominant American culture as they struggle to define themselves against a confining and treacherous social environment. (pp. 147-148)

The knowledge black women rappers offer through their songs is a valid form of knowledge worthy of study in schooling spaces and is too valuable for educators to continue to ignore if we want to become better teachers. While I do not consider women rappers' texts to be a quick fix for the often unchanging, irrelevant, and unimaginative curriculum on which schooling spaces depend, I do believe in their potential for helping teachers to understand the hip hop context that speaks in/through our students' lives. Whether we as teachers choose to recognize it or not, the hip hop context is important in our lives as well. Even though we are older, many of us claim membership in the hip hop generation through birth and/or identification, and we define ourselves, alongside our students, with/against the kinds of representations that black women rappers construct. These are the same problematic, contradictory, and troubling representations that I have tried to unpack and make meaning(s) of in this study and that have enabled me to define myself in more complicated ways. Rather than continuing to center my definition of self along race and class lines, I now know that the multiple tensions of race, gender, class, generation, sexuality, location, and language, among others, are at play as I work out my struggles with self-definition, self-love, and self-reliance. I hope that my analysis of

black women rappers' stories prompts other teachers to study women rappers' texts so they too can understand how they negotiate their definitions of self, how they represent themselves to others, and how they make meanings of the many texts they read, write, and teach. Paying closer attention to all of who we are and how we define ourselves in relation to the popular culture texts we encounter daily is critical to understanding ourselves as teachers and the curricular and pedagogical choices we make in our classrooms.

I also hope that my analysis of women rappers' texts enables teachers to understand the critiques black women rappers make about young black women's experiences, deconstruct black women rappers' representations of black women's identities, expose the contradictions in women rappers' texts, and value black women rappers' texts as pedagogical. My analysis reveals that many women rappers teach important lessons about the representation of black women around questions of black women's sexuality usually defined in terms of male desire, mainstream beauty standards, the roles of women in heterosexual relationships, control over black women's bodies, the privileging of heterosexuality, the connection between sexual freedom and black women's ownership of capital, and the necessity of writing our own representations rather than being defined by others. In my efforts to make meanings of these representations, I have learned to resist judging women rappers' texts as either positive or negative, choosing instead to read them so as to expose their contradictions and contextualize them within/against other discourses. Even though I may not have always been successful in my reading women rappers' texts in this way, I still maintain that it is

a beneficial skill for us to help our students to learn so that they can become more careful and thoughtful readers/consumers of popular culture texts.

Black women rappers' work can help to "expand the 'canon' of curriculum knowledge" (Munro, 1999; Pinar, 2001, p. 26) and complicate the already "complicated conversation" (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 848) of curriculum. A complicated conversation on its own, rap music is a cultural form that relies on multidirectional communication. Often dialogic and communal, women's raps in particular, as Missy Elliott asserts, are often in the form of conversation. She explains:

> I've always had an imagination and I listen to a lot of different writers. If you listen to my songs, they tell stories. I don't write in song form. I write almost as if I'm in conversation with somebody. That's my way of getting something off my chest. (Missy quoted in Musto, 1999, para. 16)

Women rappers most often address other women when using this method of conversation, and it is through these conversations that women rappers take on an explicit pedagogical voice that they use to share wisdom, advice, and encouragement for other black women. I close this dissertation by focusing on black women rappers' talk with other women, and I move my analysis of representations of women rappers' positioning themselves as strong, powerful players in the rap game toward an analysis of representations that reveals women rappers' movement between strength and vulnerability.

Using an autobiographical lens to highlight her mistakes growing up when she "went from dancing on tabletops to making labels pop," Eve directly addresses young girls in her rap "Heaven Only Knows" (Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady,

Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999). She explains that she has no regrets about her life even though she made some bad choices. She raps:

> See things I've done I don't regret
> I just learn from mistakes in the past
> Knowing now I had to earn respect and earn trust
> Something about school was never givin
> The way you find out what life's about is simply living
> To be strong stay strong let nobody crush you
> Your body is your temple, young girls
> Don't let him touch you
> He'll respect anything you say if he really loves you
> Don't settle for second
> Let him put no one above you
> I did a lot of things in my life I take back
> Gotta take from the good and bad, collect that
> Cause it help to build who you see now, respect that
> Young, black, and strong, keep me in ya. ("Heaven Only Knows," Let There Be Eve…Ruff Ryders' First Lady, Ruff Ryders/Interscope Records, 1999)

Eve's story about her specific life experiences before her record deal is not an unfamiliar tale for many young black working-class women. "Wanting to be grown," Eve was not happy at home and wanted to "break free." School did not offer Eve what she needed, so she decided against college, choosing instead to pursue what she describes as a "life on the streets." To make ends meet, she became a stripper, which she found to be humiliating. "Broke down from the things men would say to [her]," Eve left stripping and later landed a record deal, which propelled her out of poverty.

Eve concludes her story with a message directed at "young girls" specifically. She encourages self-love and self-confidence, advising them to stay strong even when someone tries to crush their spirit. Having already shared earlier in the rap that she was "fucking too early" at age 15, Eve cautions young girls to protect their virginity and not to be swayed by pressures from young men to have sex. Sounding like a mother, Eve

shares the proverbial "your body is your temple" message to reinforce for young girls the importance of self-respect. I hear in Eve's message my grandmother's directive all those years ago to keep my dress down, and perhaps I am more drawn to Eve's "motherly" role and positive message than I am to her gangsta bitch persona who aims to rob and humiliate her male victims. Even so, I still maintain that in both roles, Eve teaches us about the various struggles many young black women experience.

From two seemingly different spaces, one in which she shows no weakness in choosing violence as a means to getting paid and the other in which she makes herself vulnerable in admitting some life mistakes, Eve shows compassion for and a commitment to the well-being of young black women. As my analysis in Chapter 6 reveals, Eve as the gangsta bitch in "We On That Shit" offers a critique of the economic disenfranchisement of working-class black women. Eve has the black woman in the song take the man's material possessions in order to survive, not to get rich. The woman does not intend to keep all the material gained from the robbery for herself only; she chooses to empower other women when she says she will share the money with her women friends. In taking on a motherly role in "Heaven Only Knows," Eve becomes the elder who passes on wisdom to younger members of her community whom she wants to protect from hurt and rejection, perhaps even teenage pregnancy and rape.

Like Eve, Foxy Brown shares her real life troubles and mistakes in her rap "My Life" (Chyna Doll, Violator Records, 1999). Creating a community of young women who share similar experiences, Foxy directs her comments "to [her] girls cross the world that feel what [she] feels," those with "hearts bruised." Like blues women of the early twentieth century, Foxy encourages young women to "keep moving" when men leave

them rather than getting pregnant to stay connected to men who do not love them. She raps:

> I'm here to show y'all having a kid ain't meaning nothing
> That ain't keeping him, especially if he in love with another chick
> Then you stuck with the babymother shit
> Don't be loving niggas more than yourself
> Let em roam, a dog always finds his way home. ("My Life," Chyna Doll, Violator Records, 1999)

Foxy continues to counsel young women by referencing the charges against her for allegedly assaulting another woman. She raps:

> Shit, y'all don't wanna take my place, catching cases
> Spit in faces, I never seem falsely accused
> While some say it's rude
> But if I was a dude, they all be amused
> But I'm a woman, so I'm a bitch, simple as that
> Double standards, call him a Mack, call me a ho
> Say I'm in it for the dough, but tell me
> What the fuck he in it for? ("My Life," Chyna Doll, Violator Records, 1999)

Critiquing the effects of sexism in rap discourse, Foxy says that men still regard her as a bitch and a ho for behavior similar to theirs. Foxy goes on to explain that her successful rap career has not made her life easy. She raps:

> Wanted it all, now it's all mine
> Loneliness, sorrow, confusion, and pain
> Nightmares, headlines "Rapper Found Slain"
> If it wasn't for my moms, I'd drown in this pain
> Now ya'll see what it's like, ya'll don't wanna be me
> Cause it ain't always what it seem on TV
> Shit, but this is my 9 to5 ya'll
> Sometimes I wanna slit my wrist and end my life ya'll. ("My Life," Chyna Doll, Violator Records, 1999)

Foxy makes clear that the personas she assumes in her raps are different from the real life Foxy. In these lines, Foxy moves away from the highly sexualized persona that she uses to perform a black female sexuality centered in the objectification of the black woman's

body and the fulfillment of male sexual desires. In referencing her real-life suicide attempts, Foxy leaves the strong "top position" she claims for herself in "Candy"[25] and enters a space of vulnerability on wax. She becomes like any one of us who works in an environment hostile toward women and who struggles with feeling alone, unloved, misunderstood, and uncertain about our futures.

In her rap "Watch Yo Back" (Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000), Trina takes on an explicitly pedagogical role in offering advice to a community of young black women and men. True to Trina's street tough persona, she instructs insecure niggas to "critically acclaim a bitch" instead of "blaming, restraining, taming, or reining a bitch." When Trina counsels young women, she concentrates her attention on the violence that black men commit against black women. She raps:

> You gotta give your whole life for a nigga nowadays
> Can't leave your house, can't even speak your mouth
> Can't even beat him down
> Motherfuckers is so crazy, deranged
> Let em into your brain brings misery and pain
> Cause they call us lame bitches, heffers, and sluts
> You think your nut is gonna heal my bruises and batters and cuts. ("Watch Yo Back," Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000)

Trina describes the dangers of black women giving too much of themselves to black men. She explains that we risk "misery and pain" when we resist black men's demeaning representations, speak up to defend our name, and fight back against their violence. Trina steps away from the hypersexualized persona she creates in "Da Baddest Bitch"[26] that features a woman who announces her desire for "big dicks and big bank accounts" to declare in these lines that a black man's dick is not worth a violent beating. She

[25] See my analysis of "Candy" (Broken Silence, Def Jam Recordings, 2001) in Chapter 7.
[26] See my analysis of "Da Baddest Bitch" (Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000) in Chapter 6.

continues her advice by addressing a group of women whom she labels "bitches," a term that works to create community among women who experience similar struggles. She raps:

> Bitches, y'all better get tough
> And at the same time y'all better lock the game
> And re-rock the game
> Get a glock ready, sit back, cock and aim
> And try to stop the pain, cause you got a lot to gain
> Instead of sitting home waiting on niggas to call
> Putting 911 in their beepers and all
> We don't deserve this at all, y'all. ("Watch Yo Back," Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000)

Trina's advice to black women to arm themselves with a gun so they will be protected against violence is in keeping with her hard persona, but Trina also makes a call for young black women to arm themselves with self-love. Trina shows concern for the mental and physical well-being of young black women. Her concern is echoed in another rap entitled "Take Me" (Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000), a rap that imagines a better world for black women (and men). She raps:

> Take me to a place where all my girls on top
> Take me to a place where all the Benzes drop top
> Take me to a place where I ain't gotta trick for grands
> Take me to a place where my friend won't fuck my man
> Take me to a place where it's women with no hos
> Take me to a place where the thugs get early parole
> Take me to a place where we ball
> Buying cases, diamond faces, united with all races
> Take me to a place where ain't no chalk traces or court cases
> Or black faces on front pages
> Take me to a place where the haters don't hate
> Take me away, Lord knows I can't wait, come on. ("Take Me," Da Baddest Bitch, Slip-n-Slide Records, 2000)

We have much to learn from black women rappers' movement between spaces of strength and vulnerability. Though the majority of women rappers' representations are

about power and strong positioning for women in rap discourse, they also create representations that position women outside of an all-powerful image. These women rappers reveal their mistakes, weaknesses, and struggles so as to support, encourage, and teach a community of young black women who may experience similar difficulties. Black women rappers often play with a pedagogical voice that is both strong and vulnerable, something that their male peers do less often. Women are allowed this space in rap discourse, and it is the kind of space I hope to engender for my young black women students.

I hope to extend the writing of this dissertation by working with young black women students in a project that blends black women's rap and black feminist scholarship. I intend to bring black feminist writings by bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Tricia Rose that have served as the theoretical framework for this dissertation to my students' favorite rap texts so as to enrich our understandings of both. I hope to create a space during our readings together in which my young black women students and I feel strong enough as a group to talk openly and vulnerably about our struggles to define ourselves, feel good about ourselves, express our sexualities in ways that privilege our desires, and understand the multiple tensions at play in our lives.

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VITA

Nichole Ann Guillory, a native of Lafayette, Louisiana, began her career as a high school English teacher after graduating from Louisiana State University with a bachelor of science degree in English education in 1993. She spent the next five years teaching English and African American history at Breaux Bridge High School. In 1998, she earned a master's degree in secondary teaching from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and then enrolled in the doctoral program in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Louisiana State University. As a doctoral student, she taught a foundations course for elementary education majors, supervised student teachers and Holmes interns teaching English in secondary schools, and presented her scholarship at national and international conferences. She will receive a doctorate in curriculum and instruction in May 2005.